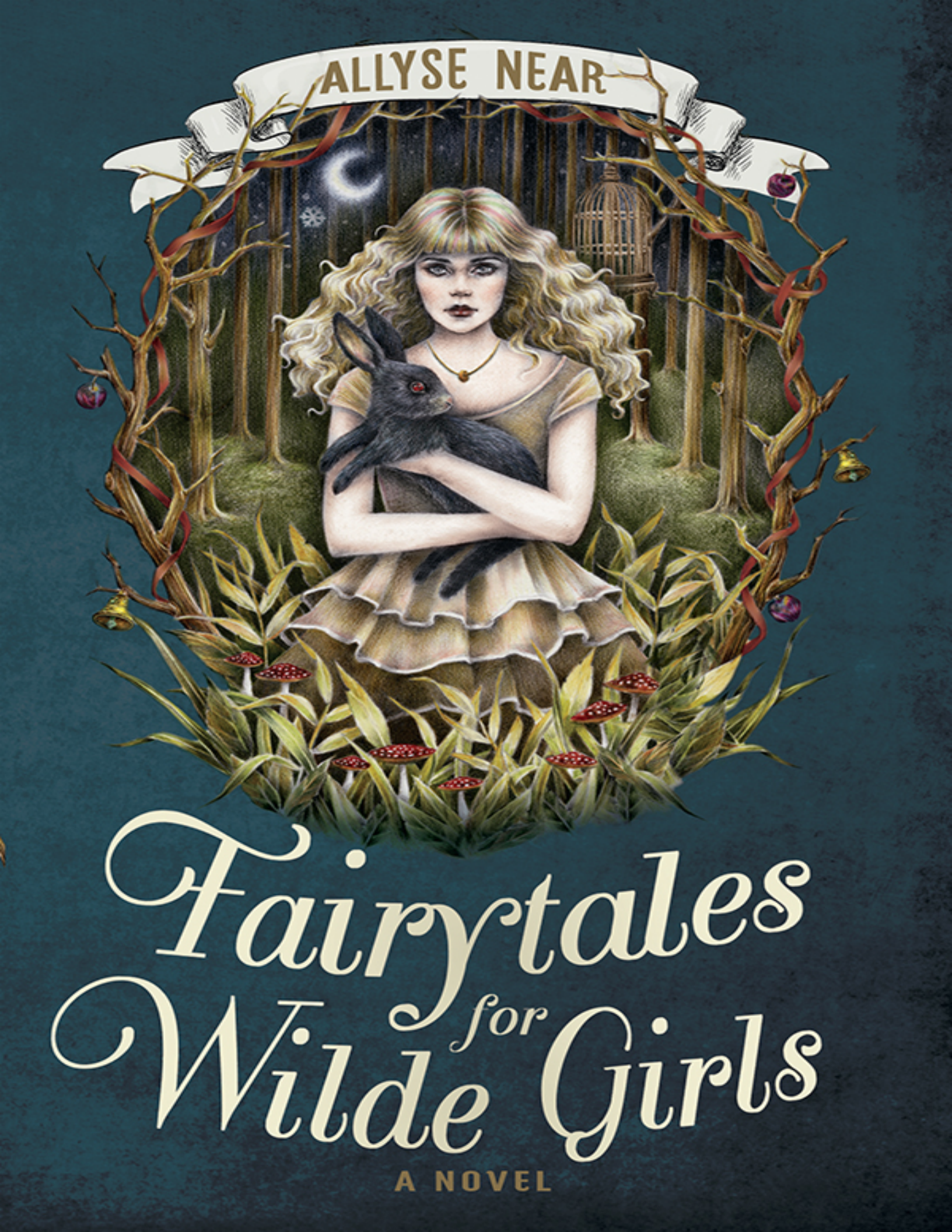
ALLYSE NEAR



Fairytales for Wilde Girls

A NOVEL

About the Book

There’s a dead girl in a birdcage in the woods. That’s not unusual. Isola Wilde sees a lot of things other people don’t. But when the girl appears at Isola’s window, her every word a threat, Isola needs help. Her real-life friends – Grape, James and new boy Edgar – make her forget for a while. And her brother-princes – magical creatures seemingly lifted from the pages of the French fairytales Isola idolises – will protect her with all the fierce love they possess. It may not be enough. Isola needs to uncover the truth behind the dead girl’s demise . . . before the ghost steals Isola’s last breath.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title
Dedication
PART ONE: The Seventh Princess
- Death Meets Isola Wilde
- Curtain Up – A Setting
- Weddings, Parties, Anything
- What Edgar Saw in a Vision, as He First Looked at Isola Wilde
- No Fair
- Body Parts
- A Picture of Isola Wilde as Viewed by a Sober Edgar Allan Poe
- Boy – An Appraisal
- Isola Isolated
- The Dead Girl
- Pretty Up Death and Girls Otherwise
- The Tomb of Sleeping Beauty by Lileo Pardieu
- The Dead Girl – Part Deux
- Little Voices
- Unlocked Hearts
- The Children of Nimue
- Tick Tock
- The Boy – A Second Glance
- Wings and Wanderings
- Wilde Child

PART TWO: Doll House
- Guinevere's Rabbits
- Names Exchanged
- To the Waters and the Wilde
- Forever the Girl – Advice from Saint Pip
- The Moon Melodies
- Starring Edgar Llewellyn as Himself
- Isola on the Outer
- The Mermaid's Tale
- Bloodpearl Girls
- Lady of the Unicorns by Lileo Pardieu
- Isola's Nursery
- A Heathen's Prayer
- Hear the Daisies
- Viking
- Isola Juvenalia
- Sharps
- Sleepless Beauty
- Girls and Unicorns

PART THREE: Bride and Gloom
- Death Wears Curls
- Horrorshow
- Edgar Allan Poe and the Zombie Mona Lisa
- 'Folie' Is French for 'Mad'
- A Shroud of Songbirds
- Edgar and Isola and a Party – Part Deux
- The Clock Strikes Midnight

- No Trail of Breadcrumbs
- Isola Intensive
- Edgar the Ripper
- Sex, Drugs and Grape Tomoyaki
- Mother Wilde’s Lock and Key
- Moon Clue
- Betrayal
- True Nature
- Madame Guillotine
- The Book of Revelation

PART FOUR: Kill the Cosmic Circus

- Isola Interrupted
- Fair Bright
- His Endless List of Reasons
- Stopped Clock
- Springling
- An Already Broken Pact
- The Midnight Fountain
- Last Man Standing
- Bunny Batman
- Chapel Blitz
- A World without Treasure
- The Gargoyle Commandments
- Snowflake Romantics
- Toxic Pretty
- Dream-weaving
- Meat and Bones
- Teenage Hexorcism
- Cage, Moon, Stripe
- Killers
- Carnivore
- Hair, Meat, Flower
- Water and Stone
- Weaknesses
- Champagne Gone Sour
- Two Isolas
- In the Belly of the Wolf

PART FIVE: Teenage Exorcism

- Weapons of Bones
- Isola and Dusk Ride Out
- The Bright Eyes of Annabel Lee
- Death Masks
- Daughter of the Séance
- The Girl Who Was a Fairytale
- Silent Heart
- Witch of the Woods
- Killing Loneliness, Eating Time
- Goodbye-blood
- Lost and Found
- Wolverine Queen by Lileo Pardieu
- Lost and Found – Part Deux
- Beautiful Things
- Hearing Daisies
- La Mort d’Isola
- Talisman
- Teenage Exorcism
- The Ever After

About the Author

Acknowledgements

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Loved the book?

Fairytales for Wilde Girls

ALLYSE NEAR

RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

Dedicated to my dad,
Peter Near,
with everlasting love

And to the memory of
Isola Francesca Emily Wilde
1857–1867
‘*She can hear the daisies grow*’

PART ONE

The Seventh Princess

'Believe only half of what you see
and nothing that you hear.'

– Edgar Allan Poe

Death Meets Isola Wilde

Once upon a time, Isola Wilde was watching late-night television with her eldest brother, Alejandro, when Channel 12 broadcast a live suicide.

The teenage boy in his leather jacket had hair the colour of desert dust and freckles like actual spots of desert dust. The news camera zoomed, and he blurred then sharpened, a drunken vision.

Isola Wilde's shoulders tensed. Her hands curled into sucker-punch fists. Intrinsically, she knew this boy. He knew her.

They had never met.

He was at a county fair an hour north of Isola's hometown, Avalon. The boy had clambered from his fairy-lit gondola at the top of the Ferris wheel and stood amongst the network of steel. He didn't look frightened. He wasn't even shaking.

A crowd had gathered, forming an ouroboros around the Ferris wheel. Some pointed their phones and cameras at him, recording his silent last words. His Aladdin eyes flickered like candlelight – at the earth he'd soon slam into, at the news camera fixed on him – and he stared through the television to Isola, who met his gaze with rapt attention.

Her: curled up in a pile of pillows, in her striped socks and summery bloomers, gnawing on her necklace chain.

Him: standing at the precipice.

Then the boy was falling, and the air whistled around his plummeting body like somebody saying, *I love you*.

Too late, Alejandro realised and reacted. He ducked over Isola as though to shield her from the impact, as though he could take the folly of gravity upon himself.

At the top of the Ferris wheel, the empty carriage rocked with the momentum of his jump. Or maybe that was his ghost, already taking up residence, cursed to ride the glittering Ferris wheel forever.

There are worse destinies to be had, Isola supposed, as Alejandro apologised profusely for a death he didn't die, as the crowd's screams were intercut with shots of frazzled newsreaders pawing loose their ties that seemed suddenly like nooses.

Isola Wilde was watching television with her brother Alejandro.

She was an only child.

Dramatis Personae

ISOLA WILDE: Sixteen. Unnatural blonde. Avalon's resident ingénue misfit.

MOTHER WILDE: Gemini. Middle-aged and still beautiful, whose dazzle has dimmed in the years since her diagnosis. Likes washing down her sundry medications with Dickensian helpings of gin.

FATHER WILDE: Tradesman. Bearded. Once nicked a few of his wife's pills to see if life looked any better from the middle of the haze. Disappointed to learn it just looked foggier.

Curtain Up – A Setting

EXT. AVALON, a mousy village on the south-west English coast, sunk at the bottom of a valley, ringed in scrubby woodland and leviathan hills.

The highest hill was dense with **VIVIEN'S WOOD,** deigned haunted by superstitious townsfolk and merely creepy by the sceptics. An unpaved road around the woodland was the only means of access, unless one wanted to tackle the hour-long trek through the rambling woods. Nobody did, except **ISOLA WILDE.**

VIVIEN, its namesake, was the lovely creature who entombed the wizard Merlin in his tree-casket. Perhaps insects burrowed into the log and munched through his putrefying guts, then spread his enchanted blood as pollen from glittering beetle-wings, or via their tiny dewy footprints on tree-leaves. Vivien trapped all kinds of magic in that forest.

AURORA COURT, the tiny street isolated by the vast woodland. Only four mis-numbered houses stood on the lonely court. At Number Thirty-six lived **THE WILDES.** Houses one through thirty-five had presumably long since returned to nature, hungry vines having eaten through the rotted floorboards.

THE THREE OTHER HOUSES OF AURORA COURT: one with a sign 'To Let', another with a sign newly stickered 'Sold', and the third occupied by an old hermit our heroine called **BOO RADLEY,** who occasionally shouted Bible verses and doomsday prophecies at her in the garden.

NUMBER THIRTY-SIX was a weatherboard house: two stories tall; front door crooked from adolescent slamming; a garden hardly tended but thriving nonetheless; the enchanted castle behind the hedge of thorns. On the second storey was the princess's tower room, candles holding vigil on the sill; the door was only ever locked from the inside.

Weddings, Parties, Anything

There was a Big Party happening the last Saturday in August, a welcome round of applause as the gold-dusk curtains closed on another summer's break. It had been a topic of shark-frenzied discussion for weeks, the streets of Avalon brimming with chunks of meaty gossip and excitement, and no-one was sure whether the Reality of the situation would measure up to the Impossible Expectations.

At the party was a boy called Edgar. He had been dragged there by his friend Pip Sutcliffe.

Music blasted from the stereo, and guests haggled to veto the playlist. There was a dry-ice fog machine and blue laser lights, ice cube-cushioned ciders and cranberry vodkas, and stiletto heels sticking to the carpet.

Edgar was standing over the shiny depression of the kitchen sink, rubbing at his curdling stomach. He'd never been much of a drinker, and the cold beer he clutched was little more than a party prop.

A boy wearing obnoxious sunglasses was leaning against the nearby fridge, attempting to chat up a girl who was perched on a stool at the breakfast bar.

'You smoke?' said the boy.

'Only passively,' said the girl.

'I mean dope.'

'What'd you call me?'

Edgar snorted into the sink, which was already slick with someone else's candy-coloured vomit. The boy slouched off; Edgar caught the girl's eye. She winked.

What Edgar Saw in a Vision, as He First Looked at Isola Wilde

Glass heels, glass lips, hands grasping a glass parasol, the draped stiffness of a shatterproof ballgown – a glass Cinderella.

Music thumped through the floor and travelled up Edgar's shoes like an electric current, knotting around his spine. No lyrics or discernible tune; just noise, jungle drumming, an aural extension of Edgar's racing heartbeat.

She had a great mass of wavy hair so blonde it burned Edgar's scalp to think about. Rainbow streaks at the roots, like melted Skittles. Navy-blue lipstick to match an oceanic gush of a party frock. On a chain around her neck was what might have been a minuscule golden carriage.

As the strobes switched back to solid blue jets, and the maybe-chariot turned back into a possible-pumpkin, her gaze held his and something in her face struck twelve; her pupils became the black bells in the clocktower marking midnight.

'Um, hi,' said Edgar, with a silly sort of wave. The wink had thrown a casual spark in his direction, into the wild grass of his consciousness, and caught ablaze.

She swung slightly on the stool. 'I don't smoke,' she clarified, 'but thanks anyway.'

'Um, no – I don't either,' said Edgar.

She shrugged, lifting her drink – a flute of champagne with a dripping lemon slice bayoneted on the rim. 'Truth is, I can't. My brother'd kill me.'

'Ah,' said Edgar, turning to lean his back against the sink. 'Protective?'

'Like a bulletproof vest.'

They both looked awkwardly at the floor, taking long slurps of their respective drinks.

'I'm Edgar.'

'Aha.' She smiled conspiratorially. 'Thought you looked familiar.'

What *did* he look like, all clammy and pale? Edgar pressed the cold beer bottle to his sweat-beaded forehead in the most nonchalant way possible. ‘Oh – do I know you?’

‘Nope. But I know you. I’ve read your work.’

He looked at her blankly as she raised an eyebrow, tracing the rim of her glass as though it were a magic lamp ripe for rubbing. ‘Edgar Allan Poe? Um, you mean, like, *The Raven*?’

‘Sure. Not your best, though.’

He guffawed, then cringed at the sound. ‘I’m just Edgar.’

With a hiss, the fog breathed through the room again, shrouding them in alien-blue mist. Through it, she extended her hand to shake his; a flash of bitten-down, glitter-coated nails.

‘I’m Annabel Lee.’

It wasn’t until the party was in its early-morning death throes, after Edgar had stumbled through the maze of entwined legs and deflated balloons to a miraculously free chair, Googling her name on his phone, that he realised.

‘For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride, In the sepulchre there by the sea – In her tomb by the sounding sea.’

No Fair

The bathroom was jungle-fogged, flooded with puddles, piled with soaked towels; cakes of soap with long strands of blonde baked in.

A girl in pieces: Barbie-thin ankles, a shaving cut on her knee; hipbones she could stab you with; white hands gelled with strawberry body lotion.

Isola Wilde turbaned her head in a towel and raised a hand to clear the fog from the mirror. She paused, squinting at her cloudy reflection in the glass, and for a moment she felt like a blurred-out identity, a shadow half-glimpsed on a wall. Anonymous Wilde.

‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall,’ she breathed around the sticky air in her lungs, ‘who’s the fairest of them all?’

Words appeared in the fog, letters traced in the mirror by the clever fingers of some old magic trapped in the walls:

TEENAGE GIRLS ARE ALL UNFAIR

‘Dressed or not, I’m coming in, Isola.’

Isola quickly wiped the mirror as Mother Wilde pushed open the door. The mirror should have named her mother Best and Fairest; even this ill, even practically bed-ridden, with her hair a nest to nurse long-flown dreams, crop circles under her eyes. She still held vestiges of beauty, a sort of glamour gone to seed – like an ageing Monroe might have looked if they’d pumped her guts in time.

But still, all Isola’s favourite pictures of Mother were from before the diagnosis. Blurry in Polaroid, smattered with freckles, lying on a bed in the late eighties and twisted up in a curly phone cord with no pill bottles on the bedside table.

‘Oh good, you’re not naked,’ said Mother. ‘Here, let me help get that hair under control.’

Isola obediently lowered her hands. Mother gave a wry apple-peel smile. She pulled down Isola's makeshift turban and started rubbing her daughter's hair dry, combing her fingers through the bedraggled knots. 'Did you get in a fight again? Your eyes are all black,' Mother noted.

Isola scrubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands. 'No, I slept in my make-up,' she replied.

In truth, she'd hardly count *that* as sleeping. She'd left the party early but lingered late in the woods, and afterwards her sleep had been disrupted by hazy little dreamscapes of carnivals and boys perched to fly, arms outstretched over glittering heights . . .

'That late, huh?' Mother sounded amused, twisting Isola's hair off her wet neck. 'Don't let your dad know. He still thinks you're asleep before the a.m., bless. He doesn't know you saw that dreadful thing on the Friday night news, either.'

Isola's eyes widened minutely, and Mother's fingers stilled mid-braid. Their reflections' gazes met, and Isola knew it was written plainly on her face as though etched by the magic mirror.

'It's all right. Just don't tell your father,' said Mother, untangling her hands. She leaned close and thumbed a few flakes of mascara from her daughter's lower lashes. 'You know how . . . *touchy* he is about stuff like that.'

❄

Mother beat Isola downstairs and stood over the stove, appearing fluffy in her dressing gown, peering into the oven as something baked inside. 'Afternoon,' said Mother slyly, winking at the clock.

'Hi,' replied Isola.

Father's face was hidden behind the newspaper, ink-obscured by screaming headlines: odd celebrity baby names and world tragedies. Without looking up, he kicked out a chair at the kitchen table with his dirty boot. 'Have some breakfast.'

'Want some eggs, Isola?' asked Mother.

'No thanks.'

At this, Father peered over the top of his paper, suspicion furrowing his brow. ‘Anything happen last night?’

‘Nothing news-worthy,’ said Isola, plopping down on the chair.

‘He wants to hear about any special *boys*,’ said Mother in a stage-whisper. ‘So he can drive around their neighbourhoods and glare, y’know.’

Isola smiled mischievously. ‘Dad? Didn’t you meet Mum at a party when you were my age?’

Father Wilde grumbled but said nothing intelligible.

Mother’s face fell slightly. She turned back to the eggs, popping the yolks with the spatula.

Isola tried to burn holes in her father’s paper with her stare, urging him telepathically: *Acknowledge Mum. Just talk to her*.

‘School starts back tomorrow,’ he said abruptly. ‘Gotta get used to sleeping with the sun, Isola.’ He slapped the newspaper down on the table and downed the last of his coffee before climbing to his feet.

Isola heard the tell-tale thunk of his workboots and creased her forehead. ‘You’re not going to work, are you? It’s Sunday.’

‘Picked up a few shifts.’

The school year hadn’t started yet and already he was making arrangements that would take him out of the house; devising ways to stay out as long as Mother was home with him. Longer hours were usually the beginning, then increasingly distant jobs that took days to travel to. Now that Isola’s summer break was over, he didn’t want to be trapped in this house with Mother, not without Isola there to cut through the sad black air.

Mother was holding her hand over the pan now, flexing her fingers as though trying to catch the rising heat. Something sore and unsaid seemed to hang over the room.

Isola lowered her eyes to the table as Father packed his lunch; she recognised the front-page photograph on the paper. The great black expanse of night, the winking ring of coloured lights and iron, the blurry, lonesome figure perched atop like a little foundling-bird, still uncertain to test his wings . . .

The family cat, Morris, wound between her legs under the table, and the sudden brush of whiskers startled Isola out of her reverie. Morris mewled, and Mother coaxed him through to the next room and into the laundry,

where his food was waiting. Father plunked his cereal bowl in the sink. The unattended eggs began to sizzle evilly.

‘Dad? Eggs.’

Father Wilde jumped and hurried to the stove. ‘Scatterbrained,’ he muttered under his breath, scraping the blackened eggs into the rubbish bin.

Isola scowled. She hated the way he spoke about Mother. At least she was up today, out of bed, trying to make conversation. That was more than Isola could say for *him*.

Body Parts

The plum tree in the Wildes' front garden was dying.

It had been doing so for three years now; occasionally, Lazarus-like, it would groan out of its grave-state and fruit would drip like juice prisms from its boughs, purple crystals. Then the plums would wither and parachute down, and the tree would sink a little deeper into the earth, its branches turning the faded grey of moor mist; the wind no longer whistling joyfully about it, but murmuring, as though it knew it danced at a deathbed.

The afternoon stretched out before Isola, a last day of freedom. Father had driven off and Mother had slumped upstairs and now the house stood like an Amityville Horror, somehow so empty even with Mother bundled back into her bed.

Isola closed her eyes and crossed her legs, assuming a yoga position her mother had taught her (when yoga had briefly been the new acupuncture, had been the new Zoloft); always something else to try, a new cure-all in her manic stages. The faux-goddess grew sharper in her mind: roots dragging through her hair, sunbaked skin, earth under her fingernails.

Sensing the familiar rustle of clothing above her, Isola opened her eyes, blinking out the sunlight, which had collected like rainwater in the sockets.

Alejandro stood in the poor shade the tree cast, offering her his saddest smile.

'It's really going to die this time,' Isola said softly.

'Yes, I believe so,' he mused, then added, almost hesitantly, 'whenever my mama was ill, she always sat up in bed to fix her hair. She said pains portend guests, and she wanted to be prepared to receive them.'

Isola peeked up at him, surprised. She didn't know much about his family, his Life Before; she was familiar with the skeleton of the story, but not the meat.

Alejandro crouched down beside Isola, too proper to sit himself in the dirt. ‘When my sisters were struck down, she would always rouse them to rag-curl their hair.’

‘That can’t have gone down well.’

‘Oh, they *loathed* it.’ He paused. ‘But dressing properly always made Mama feel better, I believe.’

Uncrossing her legs, Isola said, ‘Well, if you reckon it’ll help . . .’

‘What will? *Querida*?’

But Isola had already taken off into the house, answering his question when she emerged with an armful of plastic bags bulging with Christmas trinkets from the attic.

Alejandro and Isola strung lights around the tree, hoping for a pretty effect of sun spotting through coloured glass in lieu of electrical effects. They tied baubles where the plums should have grown. Gaudy tinsel looped the boughs like feather boas on a drag queen.

‘Perhaps an angel for the top, too,’ suggested Alejandro.

‘No way!’ She shook her head. ‘We don’t need to remind it of its impending death with religious iconography.’

‘Christmas *is* religious iconography, Isola.’

‘Besides,’ she said cheerfully, ‘it’s not going to die.’

‘But you just said –’ Her dress pocket buzzed, and Alejandro asked, ‘Bee?’

Isola shook her head again, extracting her vibrating mobile phone. ‘Grape.’

I TOTLLY HAVE CARPET BURN ON MY KNEES FRM THE PARTY LAST NITE, Grape complained.

THAT’S WHAT SHE SAID, Isola texted back.

Grape sent an icon of a laughing face, adding, CARPET BURN COZ I FELL DOWN THE STAIRS AND IT WAS SPECTCULR SO I HAD 2 PRETEND I DID IT ON PURPOSE. MY HAND LOOKS LIKE A MANGO (SIZE AND COLOUR) COZ I LANDED ON IT AND YOU TOTALY MISSED IT, WHY DID U LEAVE SO ERLY?

‘CARPET BURN’ SOUNDS LIKE AN STI, Isola replied.

LOL FINE, BE MYSTERIOUS. U MISSD A BRILLIANT NITE.

AND YOU’LL BE MISSING SCHOOL TOMORROW, I’M SURE.

PROBBLY. MUM JUST SAID SHE THINKS MY WRIST IS BROKEN?!! HAHAHAHA LOL

Alejandro peeked over Isola's shoulder on the pretext of reaching for Santa-shaped baubles. 'You left early?' he enquired.

Isola pocketed the phone. 'I shouldn't have gone.'

'Why ever not?'

'Because –' she waved a frustrated hand to the upstairs window and the conspicuously closed curtain '– Mum got herself in a state and now Dad's taken off.'

'All this because of a social event?' He raised a dark eyebrow.

'Social event . . . You make me sound like a debutante,' she said mockingly, curtseying and making a rather ugly face.

'Well, how else will the suitors know to come calling?'

'That's why Dad's in a foul mood, apparently. Suitors, you know.' She rolled her eyes. 'Cause there's such an abundance after me.'

'Fathers can be foul when it comes to such matters,' said Alejandro fondly. 'Releasing the child's hand to allow another to take it in marriage.'

'Marriage?' spluttered Isola.

She'd only made an appearance at the party because she knew she'd be noticed more if she wasn't there. Alejandro had told her that, in his experience, people were all about the empty spaces; the things they don't have, the words that aren't said. In Avalon, it was all about who *wasn't* touching who, who *hadn't* shown up to the party.

'I didn't even stay long,' Isola admitted, scratching at the sap bleeding along the boughs of the dying tree. 'I was in the woods, mostly. Grandpa says the herd's got a beautiful new foal.'

'And did you find the creature?'

Isola shook her head. 'No. It was weirdly quiet in there, though. Like there wasn't a single animal ali–'

She jumped as a flock of finches bulleted from the treetops, carolling shrieks of terror, sensing – before Isola and Alejandro heard it – a rumble that became a roar.

From around the edge of the woods, a moving van burping black exhaust fumes came trundling up the street. Its howling engine cut in front of the house opposite. Two cars followed in its wake: a modest station wagon with a sofa tied to the roof, and a sleek city car.

‘New neighbours,’ Alejandro commented, watching with keen interest as the furniture-Tetris got under way. A bed frame was dropped in the driveway, and a clumsy mover knocked down the letterbox with a dining table.

Isola shrugged. ‘Pass me those reindeer antlers.’ She continued bedecking the tree, disguising its bald patches, its rapidly browning leaves. Isola tried her best not to watch. She knew how it felt to be stared at. But she was only human, and when she did finally peek between the gaudy-bright branches, she saw:

A boy with black hair and a hangover slouch.
A boy she’d only seen through blue mist.

He was moving things from the station wagon into the house. Boxes of worldly possessions. Hidden things.

The boy retrieved another armful from the boot. He headed towards his house but turned suddenly, perhaps spying the peripheral glitter of sun on the plum tree. He looked straight through the thinning branches at her.

He didn’t see Alejandro. Nobody ever did.

The boy waved without raising his arms – only wiggling his fingers. He had a pink skateboard under one arm and a box marked ‘BODY PARTS’ under the other. He walked to the end of his driveway. Isola mirrored him, the asphalt between them suddenly uncrossable, a tarry River Styx.

A Picture of Isola Wilde as Viewed by a Sober Edgar Allan Poe

He recognised her immediately. The dark and the noise and the liquor could only camouflage so much. Cinderella's day-time disguise was a girl with:

- origami hair, as though some enthusiastic Japanese schoolgirl had tried to fold each section into a variety of animal shapes. It'd come up wild instead, a veritable safari. Her body seemed tiny and impeccably neat by comparison.
- arched eyebrows, pencilled the colour of Swiss chocolate, a shade too dark for her dyed hair.
- oodles of scarlet ribbons woven through her white-goldilocks.
- bare feet and a cream-froth dress that were Woodstock-muddy.

And she was alone – excluding the pathetically wilting plum tree – and looked for all the world content with her own company.

Boy – An Appraisal

Isola Wilde knew perfectly well that appearances told you nothing about a person, unless the only thing you were interested in was establishing from their attire what period they died. Nevertheless, she noticed several key things about Edgar Allan Poe's appearance that she hadn't in the smoggy microcosm of the Big Party's kitchen the night before.

He was big. Tall and broad with meaty hands, a slight pudginess about him.

He wore braces – like a mouthful of diamonds in the sunlight.

Large round ears, sticking out and ending in slight elfin points, a changeling baby's.

A battle helmet of curly black hair.

Distinctly rounded shoulders, as if slouching would somehow make his overall size less noticeable.

'Going to give me your real name this time, bright eyes?' the boy called.

Isola felt a smile curling her lips. 'Isola Wilde.'

She knew he didn't believe her when he replied, 'I'll call you Number Thirty-six, then, shall I?'

'And you must be the new Number Thirty-seven.'

Edgar Allan Poe/Number Thirty-seven bowed in acknowledgement. A Playstation controller fell out of the BODY PARTS box and he hastened to pick it up.

'Edgar!' A middle-aged woman emerged from the house with fresh paint stains over her smallish baby-bump and a relaxed slouch that mirrored her son's. 'I need you – Portia's getting into the silverware and you know how she is with knives!'

Edgar Allan Poe waved at Isola again, almost dropping the box. He struggled to heave it higher. 'See you round, Annabel Lee.'

Isola returned to the tree, lacing reams of golden bells through the branches.

‘You told him your real name,’ said Alejandro quietly.

He was rearranging tinsel, his face obscured, but Isola knew from his tone what his expression would be like. She could sense it, slight on the wind, if she sniffed: jealousy, mixed with a heady dose of love and a strong desire to protect her. Not just from scrapes and sickness and televised suicides, but from boys, from men.

Alejandro had been Isola’s brother since she was four years old. Her favourite brother, and the first of six.

Alejandro

Isola Isolated

There had been an Isola Wilde once before, dead at the ripe old age of nine in the year 1867. The famous Oscar's baby sister. The second Isola was named for her.

Isola's mother loved Oscar Wilde. If he weren't both gay and deceased, she always said, she would have married him in a Victorian heartbeat. Modern Isola often wondered what nineteenth-century Isola would have been like had she grown to a more respectable age. Nine years old. Each year lived like a cat's life.

The second Isola thought the first Isola – the *real* Isola Wilde – would have grown into a remarkable lady, if given a sporting chance. A playwright, a poet, an artist. She would have been quick with a quip, like her brother, and written twisted, haunted books with velvety lesbian undertones, and maybe even been thrown in jail for it, too.

The second Isola didn't die at nine. At her tenth birthday party, on a lawn scattered with children clutching fistfuls of frosted cake and rapidly deflating balloons hovering at ankle-height, Mother Wilde sat in the dewy shadow of a plum tree and drew Isola on to her lap, whispering in her ear that she must live twice as hard on behalf of her tragic forebear.

Teenage Isola wore too much make-up and was almost uncomfortably skinny, her long limbs bunchy, stuffed with straw – like a voodoo doll of a popular girl.

She lived in black-laced army boots and periodically invented her own fashions. She was only recently sixteen, and she had a secret universe a doctor once called a 'fantastic flight of fancy'. Her parents had long since abandoned the doctor's suggestion to encourage and play along – and yet it was still real, often more solid to her than the planet under her feet. Her middle name was Lileo. Pronounced *Lie-lee-oh*.

Isola loved things that other people didn’t, especially when it came to body features. Like overbites and freckles and rounded tummies, stretchmarks and birthmarks and pigeon toes and ears with elvish points.

Mother Wilde always said a beauty flaw was a beauty *fluke*. A good thing.

Flaws mark the flakes, she would say. Meaning flawed people are like snowflakes. Unique. Or maybe frozen.

Isola Wilde was frozen. If she licked her wrist she tasted seasalt. She knew exactly how she had come to be an ice girl. She remembered it like an old movie, a past life.

A sculptor had carved her from a block of the berg that sunk the *Titanic*. He made her in the image of his daughter, dead when her lungs swelled with blood – the dainty cough into the handkerchief, the same little spot of crimson that had taken her mother.

Completed, the sculptor moved Ice Princess Isola from his eternal winter workshop and into his little cottage by the bay. In the dead winter, which was as cold and tempered as the wedding veil of a bride left at the altar, he couldn’t bear to light the stoves and fireplaces and see the tears dripping from the sculpture’s pores, her frozen hands – blood running from a lifeline.

At winter’s end they found the sculptor blue, chill-poisoned, and the ice girl was smiling wicked-frozen forever, so perfectly formed that they thought it a shame to hide her in the cold cottage overlooking the sea. They mounted her instead in the village square, and not one summer did she so much as break a sweat.

But that was only a fairytale.

The Dead Girl

As she walked to school on Monday, Isola found a dead girl in Vivien's Wood.

The emaciated body, Holocaust-thin, was hanging from a tree. Not by a rope or a Rapunzel braid – she was stuffed inside a child-sized birdcage, cramped against the paint-flaked bars, one striped-stockinged leg hanging down and swaying like a pendulum.

Before she had discovered the corpse, Isola had been on a mission. She had deviated from her usual trail, following signs of the rarely seen herd – a possible glimpse of a rainbow tail, the tease of soft clopping up ahead. She knew for certain they were out here, but they had been scarce for years now, and she never seemed to spot them – *her*, the only girl in Avalon that even knew about the unicorns!

But the herd was forgotten as Isola stood under the cage and counted the number of times the leg swung, the crooked minutes it ticked by. She couldn't see the corpse's face, only a scrub of dirty dark hair, a grey dress. She examined the tarnished silver buckles on the black shoes, the ladders in the stockings. She reached out hesitantly.

'If you dawdle any longer, you will most certainly be late.'

She hadn't heard Alejandro appear so suddenly beside her, the way a shadow does in the midday sun. Isola dropped her outstretched hand and pressed herself against the tree trunk. The twisted dizzy branches seemed to close over her, a witch-fingered hug.

'Go along, now,' said Alejandro. He was peering up through the branches, his dark eyes searching for the bough that held the cage aloft.

'But I can't just leave her,' insisted Isola. 'I have to help her down.'

'She is beyond even your help, *querida*,' said Alejandro softly. 'Go, I will stay with her. I must see . . .'

Isola knew better than to argue with the wisest and most stubborn of her brothers. She crunched across the forest carpet, glancing back at Alejandro, who stared up as if hypnotised at the figure in the birdcage.

She knew what he needed to see. Whether the girl would return. Whether she would haunt.

Sometimes it was hard to tell what was corpse and what was ghost.

But ghosts did not frighten Isola Wilde. They never had.

Dramatis Personae

ALEJANDRO: The first prince. A beloved guardian and ghost of a young man.

DEAD BODY: A girl, a cage, a mystery.

Four was the age when Isola first starting seeing ghosts; at least, that's the earliest she could remember. Alejandro was the very first she had ever met. A dashing young man from Victorian London; beautiful, with his mother's Spanish colouring, the dandy dress and aura he'd inherited from his peacock-strutting father. He died aged twenty-four in an opium den, soaking into death as he lay in a pool of absinthe and dyed ostrich feathers – the same way he'd spent most of his short life.

❄

St Dymphna's Ladies College was staffed by nuns. A few of them still taught and the rest merely flitted like rumours on the ground, only glimpsed in slices of life – sagging grandma bras strung on a washing line in a hidden courtyard, baskets of lemons left in the locker room, candles burning lonely in the little chapel at all hours.

It was strange to be back again. Somehow, every time Isola passed through the iron-wrought gates at the end of the school year, she couldn't imagine returning in autumn. The final clang behind her seemed like a closing of a chapter, heralding a blank page to scribble on. But here she was. Grape had made good on her word, and Isola had sat beside an empty desk throughout the morning's classes.

While entering the school chapel during break, Isola passed Sister Marie Benedict in her old-fashioned habit. The nun jangled as she walked, and Isola couldn't decide if the rhythm came from her old bones scraping in lube-less sockets or from the clatter of rosary beads looped around her liver-spotted neck. Catching Isola's gaze, Sister Marie hastily crossed herself.

Isola was alone, breathing the musty candlewax and angel-dust air, inhaling the scent of sweat from a thousand past hands clasped tightly in prayer, dirt rubbed from the knees of sinners. Isola went to look at the saints' portraits on the chapel walls; daubed white faces turned heavenward, flanked by Raphaelite angels in full crusade garb, swords flaming from the hilt.

The school's namesake adorned the hallways; the frail Irish girl, only fifteen, holy in her portraits and decapitated in her grave. Dymphna was the patron saint of princesses and the mentally ill – there was a lovely dichotomy at work there, and she was one of the very few things Isola liked about religion, the other being the chapel. Even at her loneliest, Isola somehow felt the painted girl on the walls was on *her* side.

Someone had attached a sticky-note to the frame of St Dymphna's largest portrait. Isola peered closer. Written in a speech bubble, as though the painted girl was beseeching any student that wandered upon her, '*Hey girl! Don't lose your head!*'

She giggled, and the sound echoed, a haunting. No wonder Sister Marie had crossed herself upon eye contact. Isola made sure not to dip her fingers into the tiny pool of holy water on the way out; if it didn't acid-burn her skin off, it'd at least zap her good. A static charge instead of a lightning strike. Fair warning.

The bell rang, spurring a flurry of activity in the corridors, and Isola was heading to class when something black caught her eye on the third floor. A molten, tarry substance was seeping under the door of the unused bathroom. Oblivious girls stepped in it, but it did not splash or ripple; instead it merely trickled closer to Isola.

The light flickered in the hallway.

The masses of blue-clad girls were swirling, funnelling into the classrooms, while Isola stood stock-still, a pebble unmoved in a brook.

She waited until the stragglers had dispersed, then cracked open the bathroom door and remembered why it went unused. Dank and gloomy; the

walls were graffitied with declarations of love, accusations hurled at other girls, and crude cartoons of the nuns. There was a great rusty bin on the wall (an old-fashioned incinerator for ‘sanitary purposes’), which smelled smoky even though it was never switched on. The ugly neon light in the room flickered too, casting horror-movie lighting upon the damp floors and the two figures in the room.

The woman in black stood with her back to Isola, gazing at herself in the spotted metallic mirror until she met the reflection of Isola’s eyes.

‘Ruslana!’ Isola said in surprise.

Dramatis Personae

RUSLANA: The third prince. A Fury and a fierce warrior, whose promises to Isola are as solemn as blood oaths.

‘Hello, Isola.’

The light bulb flickered like moth wings. Ruslana was an entity of the dark, and the light was clever enough to avoid her – even the electrical kind.

Of her six brother-princes, Ruslana was the most frightening, the most powerful. She seemed human enough, until closer inspection. Dark eyes sewn-in deeply, like pebbles fetched from the bottom of the ocean. Talons in place of fingernails. Coarse black hair she never combed, perched in a high braid. Eyes lined heavily in black, and faintly tattooed forearms. Berry-black lips, razor-edged, capable of severing a limb. Coloured jewels studded her earlobes and weapons were hidden all over her body, contoured to her shape.

She had a great oil-spill of a cloak; the edges crept about like autonomous shadows, enfolding everything they came across. She had once shown Isola a picture of the Furies in the old Greek books; bird-like crones who killed men solely because of their Y chromosome. Ruslana had a more particular purpose.

And now she stood there in her dark garb, harnessed waist, the skirt split to the thigh and the silver breastplate echoing the warrior. Not a spectre, because she had never been human, but a spirit of women’s vengeance.

But even she wasn’t exempt from Alejandro’s rules.

None of Isola's secret brothers ever visited her at school, no matter how nervous she was about an upcoming speech, or how much they wanted to see her trip hurdles in the Autumn Athletics Carnival. Alejandro had put his foot down long ago – her life with brothers and her life without would remain resolutely separate.

'She cannot hope to fit in,' he'd said to them at the time, 'if we help her stand out.'

'What are you doing here?' Isola tried not to sound too excited. It couldn't be good news, after all, to warrant this unprecedented visit, but her heart still dropped when Ruslana sighed heavily and lowered her hood. The night cloak swirled around her before settling into even deeper darkness.

'It's about that girl,' said the Fury in her coffee-grinder voice. 'Alejandro showed me to the body.'

'Did you find out what happened to her?'

Ruslana nodded solemnly. 'The birds know,' she said. 'They have been spreading it to the fae, and the faeries were very, well, excited to tell me.'

'Sounds about right,' scowled Isola. They really could be wretched creatures; sometimes they seemed *too* pleased when terrible things happened . . .

'Oh, don't hate them, Isola,' Ruslana gently scolded. 'I know they're overdramatic little things, but I don't think they'd lie about this. It could be very well embellished, though.'

'Tell me.'

'There's a witch,' said Ruslana, 'in Vivien's Wood. Not a human – some kind of malevolent creature. They said she's not been there long, but she loves music, and all the birds in the woods have fallen silent – hiding because they're afraid of her. The witch kidnapped a girl with a beautiful voice and kept her in a cage, forcing her to sing for company. When the girl finally lost her voice, the witch left her to die.'

Ruslana leaned back further, crossing her impossibly long legs. She didn't know it, but she had fallen into the storyteller's cadence, altering her speech like Mother used to during her nightly performances in Isola's room. Of course, that was a very long time ago.

'All the birds had been listening to the girl sing for weeks, maybe months. When her songs ended, they gathered around her cage and offered to bring her seeds and beetles so she might survive until she was rescued. But she

told them, “Please, pluck out my eye, and take it to my father. He is a man of magic, and he will be able to use it.”

‘The birds argued and argued, but she croaked in her bloodied, ruined voice, “You must take my eye to my father, so he can see what I have seen. Then he will know who killed me.” So the sparrows and ravens plucked out the girl’s right eye with their razor-sharp beaks, and in pity they pecked at the skin of her wrists, until they found the taut strings carrying the blood, and plucked them up like earthworms. She bled out quickly, half-blind and voiceless, and her eye was carried back to her father, the King of a small and poor county. He cried for his daughter, but he thanked the sparrows, and summoned the court shaman to perform the ritual that would allow him to see what the eye had seen. And reflected in the iris he saw the forest witch, who was also his first wife, the old Queen of the small, poor county – his daughter’s mother. He saw her string their child in the tree, saw her force their child to sing her life away.’

Ruslana tapped her talons against the cracked porcelain sink, looking terribly despondent.

Isola frowned; it was a heart-wrenching story, as all untimely girl-deaths are, but the towering Fury had heard it all before and worse. What was it that made this particular incident have such an effect? ‘What is it, Ruslana?’

The Fury crossed her lean arms over her bodice, eyes downcast. ‘It’s too close,’ she murmured after a long moment. ‘She died in Vivien’s Wood . . . I don’t understand how I could have missed it.’

‘You’re not responsible for every girl in the world.’

‘I am for *you*. I shouldn’t have missed this. I should have sensed her pain.’

A tiny tapping at the glass jolted them both. Ruslana’s cloak had inked out the window, and she pulled the slippery material to heel, exposing the sunlight again. She went and cracked open the window. A minuscule bauble of pink light fluttered in, alighting on the Fury’s shoulder.

‘Did you tell her?’ it squeaked breathlessly.

Dramatis Personae

ROSEKIN: The fifth prince. A smart-mouthed faerie with a taste for dramatics.

‘Isola? Don’t you think it’s exciting?’ Rosekin went on, beaming. ‘A murder, right on our doorstep!’ The bright bubble of light had abated, and the miniature girl-figure stood, clinging onto Ruslana’s black braid. ‘It’s like one of those scary stories,’ the faerie added, not bothering to suppress her glee. Isola supposed she was right – it did lend itself to an air of Grimmness – but *exciting* was not a synonym for this.

‘Ooh! Ooh! Isola! Rusly!’ said Rosekin, tugging the Fury’s hair when Isola didn’t answer. ‘Remember, the *witch* is still out there, too!’

Isola shook her head, feeling slightly ill. She felt a certain possessiveness of that wood, an umbilical connection down there in the dirt and the stillness – and now she felt almost betrayed, that it would hide and harbour a murderess, that it had let a young girl swing and bleed in that birdcage without once whispering for help on the pine-needle breeze.

‘Hush,’ said Ruslana, and Rosekin snapped her fanged gob firmly shut, always and only obedient to the towering night-woman. Ruslana pulled her great seething cloak around herself, and the ceiling light bulb flickered back into a more constant rhythm. Before they both vanished the Fury gave Isola a piercing look and said in a low voice, ‘Don’t go home through the woods tonight, Isola.’

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Isola had called James, her second-most trusted soul.

It’d rung out the first time; she’d redialled and he’d picked up the second call almost immediately.

‘What,’ he’d grumbled, not even posing it as a question. He had still been sore with her, and been passive-aggressive about letting her know.

‘D’you wanna hang out?’

James was now waiting at the gate as school was let out, a cigarette squashed in his scowl. All the girls stared; some even swooned, overwhelmed by the mere presence of a boy on the school grounds, even if he was only lingering at the border.

Dramatis Personae

JAMES SOMMERWELL: The second prince. Relationship status = currently kind of awkward.

This was James: nervous fingers, acne-scarred, shirts always stretched at the neck as if he had escaped a daily throttling. A lanky Iggy Pop body, muscle plates like insect shells. Isola's oldest flesh-and-blood friend, and her second pretend-brother.

Emotions argued on his face when he saw her; an oddly intense happiness battled a forced apathy.

'Hey,' he muttered, apathy emerging triumphant. He'd smoked right down to the filter and crushed the cigarette butt under his shoe, leaving it like a love token by the gates of the old nunnery.

'Where's the sidekick?' he asked quietly as they began walking.

'Sidelined.'

'Oh, yeah. I heard about that party,' he said, scratching his whiskery cheek.

They stopped on the High Street to buy cappuccinos in flimsy paper cups from the little café. Isola went to the florist next door and, when the shop attendant was busy misting the roses, nicked a flock of purple hyacinth blossoms. She zipped them in her schoolbag and they continued walking.

James's neighbourhood was loud and dry. A man in orange overalls was chainsawing through the last tree on the street while new houses were being built – three great raw skeletons, skinned tree-bones on display. The industrial cacophony made Isola wince, and she tried not to imagine the rattling chainsaw as the pained, frightened wails of the tree. This wasn't Vivien's Wood, she told herself sternly, but her pace sped up just the same.

A man atop a ladder whistled obnoxiously as they passed. All the workmen laughed.

In her periphery, Isola saw James's neck stiffen, his fists curl. Isola didn't pause – she didn't want to start a scene, get him in a fury. It would take him hours to work himself out of it. She glanced over her shoulder and flipped them off.

They slipped through backyards and doubled back to the Sommerwell house, which lay sideways on an urban stretch of streets leaning into the

valley below. There weren't any trees left on this street, either.

Upstairs to James's room. It resembled a genetic splice between a going-out-of-business record store, a movie theatre and a cosy little crack house. A python rubbed its belly on the side of a glass tank in one corner. Tarantino flicks were forever playing on the television, a glitzy pulp of moving wallpaper.

Upstairs the air was hot and thick with remembrance of her last visit.

Images unspooling like the movie reels he loved. They hadn't spoken since. She had returned without anything prepared. No apologies, no promises to put the past behind. Another girl would have avoided James until the freshly spilled awkwardness evaporated dry. But Isola was not another girl, and she wasn't sure if it would ever truly dissipate.

She had not thought this through.

He sprawled on the eternally unmade bed, his face coloured in the garish brights of *Pulp Fiction*. Isola sat on the carpet, breathing hard, suddenly nervous. What had possessed her to come here? And then she remembered, why she hadn't walked through her forest this afternoon, why she'd felt unnerved enough to call on her childhood prince –

His hand dangled off the bed, hovering near her. Isola itched to swat it.

She got up again, plopping her schoolbag in the far corner. His room was coloured like a bruise: the windows were constantly curtained, the only light the sickly blue glow of technology. She ran her finger along the DVD stack, squinting to read the spines. She'd seen almost everything here, which meant James had seen it all ten times over. Isola wriggled her finger into the crack at the top of the python tank. The snake opened one eye lazily, then closed it again, supremely unconcerned by her presence.

She smiled, and made a resolution to be more like him. To spend more time chilled and uncaring, maybe even more time sleeping on flat, warm rocks.

'Good advice, snake.'

'What?' James looked round at her. 'What did you say?'

'Just . . . pretending something,' she replied. He shook his head. 'Fuck, you say such fucking weird things.'

'Is that still your favourite word?' asked Isola interestedly. 'I like "verisimilitude". Tolkien said the most beautiful English phrase is "cellar door".'

‘Obviously he’d never been locked behind one.’

Isola turned her gaze back to the python. ‘Got any mice?’

James raised the remote, turning down the Tarantino. ‘I might,’ he replied. ‘Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?’

Isola shook her head.

‘No, nothing’s wrong, or no, you won’t tell me?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Well, what happened at school today?’

The snake lifted its head, watching the dangling ring on her necklace as though hypnotised.

‘Not much,’ she said. ‘Grape wasn’t there, obviously. I went into the chapel and had lunch under the old organ. One of the nuns actually averted her gaze when she saw me,’ she added, feigning offence.

‘Probably surprised she didn’t burst into flames,’ snickered James. ‘What did that nun call you once? A wild child, right? The heathen *Wilde Child of the woods . . .*’

In a breathless flash, Isola saw the trees again, heard the sorrowful creak of a cage on a rope, Alejandro’s shoes scuffling in the dirt. She heard a sparrow snap a red blood-string, an eye gobbled from a wet socket.

She caught her breath and turned back to the tank. James hadn’t noticed; his focus was back on the film, despite the fact he’d watched it so often he could mouth the dialogue. Isola shifted the glass lid of the tank. ‘I found a dead body in the woods today,’ she said. ‘Can I take him out?’

The movie filled the silence. Nothing but the puncture bites of gunfire.

‘Isola – what?’

‘Can I take him out?’ She was already reaching in, tugging the python up by his middle and draping him round her neck like some grand grotesque scarf. The snake wound itself round and round her necklace chain, seeking a comfortable place to cling.

James lifted the remote, and this time he switched the television off. The silence stretched elastic.

‘Isola,’ he said in obvious shock. ‘A dead body? Do you . . . really mean that?’

She wouldn’t look at him. ‘Oh. Yes, I do mean that.’ She spoke more to the snake than him.

‘But, are you . . . who’ve you told?’

‘You.’

‘Isola! I – damn, are you okay?’

The snake’s curious little head disappeared down her shirt. Isola tried to fish him out of her bra. ‘I’m fine. She’s not. She was in a birdcage . . . strung up a tree.’

The words hung like stockinged legs, strange and somewhat ridiculous in the context of his bedroom. She heard a long exhale, and finally turned to look at him.

James’s ashen face seemed to relax; his glazed eyes blinked moisture back into the sockets. ‘Fuck, you nearly gave me a heart attack. And why – why do you do that?’ The shocked relief had already passed; he looked angry now. ‘Tell stories like they really happened?’

‘It *did* happen!’ said Isola hotly. ‘There are bodies everywhere lately, first that TV suicide Sunday night and now this. The dead girl’s still in the woods, I could show you –’

‘You saw that suicide? The fairground one?’ James sounded concerned.

‘Yes, but –’

‘Isola. Look at me for a minute.’ He formed the words with deaf lips, exaggerating the shapes. ‘Are you saying there’s *really* a body in the woods?’

‘*Yes*, and she was a princess, and –’

James stood suddenly, the blood rushing from his face. ‘Where did you hear this? Who puts this stuff in your head?’

Isola thought he sounded like Father when he spoke like that. She felt her face redden, and said defensively, ‘You wouldn’t even believe me last time –’

James laughed, sounding slightly manic, and threw his arms in the air. ‘Let me guess – the faeries told you, right?’ He snapped his fingers. ‘What was her name? Rose? Rosekin?’

She cringed, knowing already what he’d say.

‘Isola, Rosekin’s not *real*.’

Her gaze wandered to the schoolbag, the shoplifted flowers resting their snoozy bell-shaped heads inside.

A few years back, James had demanded an explanation for her near-constant flower-foraging, and she’d told him about her responsibility; to feed a garden faerie named Rosekin. Rosekin would have liked nothing

more than to devour Mother's secret garden in its entirety, so to dissuade her Isola brought home whatever she could find in Vivien's Wood, blooms cut from strangers' gardens and the manicured flowerbeds at St Dymphna's. Occasionally, she'd visit the florist on High Street and, while pretending to peruse seed breeds and Valentine's specials, mash up petals in the pocket of her blazer.

Even after he'd dismissed her notions, she didn't hide her floral thievery. Those flowers were for Rosekin; what further proof did he need?

Isola felt very daft, suddenly, wearing a snake and no wiser than Eve; she hated that she'd once told him about the faeries, about her secret friends. He thought she was crazy.

And he didn't know the half of it.

She'd only told him because she spent too much time around him. James would notice her focus fade away, see her smile into empty corners. And something had possessed her to tell him about her tiny secret friend, and of course he hadn't believed her, and why had she thought otherwise? He'd seen every film version of *Peter Pan* but did not believe in Neverland, either.

James had lived in greenery once too, but now his forest was gone, receding like a hairline up the valley's scalp. Maybe that's why her world could only ever be a fantasy to him.

She dropped her gaze, and James pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly exasperated. The small part inside her that recoiled wanted to shrink away and nurse its wounds – she saw the look in his eyes and felt that piece freeze over, so she couldn't feel anything at all.

'Isola – just, don't say shit like that. You sound like your mother!'

It took her some time to unwind the reptile, ruining any hope for a dramatic exit. When the snake was finally free she plopped him in the tank and left without a word. Stopping in the driveway, she kicked the front tyre of James's car in frustration then wrote with her finger along his dirty windshield:

SORRY
– I.L.W.

Pretty Up Death and Girls Otherwise

On Friday afternoon, Isola discovered Mother had added a nativity scene to the plum tree deathbed. Plastic and real candy canes had been arranged amongst the dry leaves. The peppermint stripes reminded Isola of the dead girl's stockings, and she shivered when she passed the tree, continuing through to the elaborate front garden, what she'd always thought of as a secret garden with invisible stone walls. All Mother's doing, every flowering honeysuckle bush and jasmine vine. She'd stopped tending it a long time ago, but it seemed more beautiful now, thriving in advanced neglect.

'Hey, Isola!' A shouted squeak issued from a stalk of lavender. 'I like what you did with the plum tree! Prettying up death is so *you*!'

Winsor. The bratty garden faerie eternally locked in a hate/hate relationship with Isola, who merely ignored her, as per usual.

❄

Mother slept most of Saturday. Father had taken an extra shift. With the sun peeking shyly between clouds, Isola arranged a tartan picnic rug in the patchy shade of the plum tree. She opened her favourite book in the world and began flicking for a story.

Isola's Favourite Book in the World
Les Fables et les Contes de Fées de Pardieu
or
The Pardieu Fables and Fairytales
by Lileo Pardieu

A memory: Isola as a toddler, sugarlump teeth, skin still smelling of milk. Hair that curled without use of an iron and sweet dresses that didn't matter were dirtied. When she was old enough, she demanded the usual suspects at bedtime: *The Little Mermaid, Hansel and Gretel, Beauty and the Beast*.

Even then, Mother's contempt for non-Pardieu fairytales was obvious.

'Hmph,' she snorted derisively at her latest request, folding up her knees to perch on Isola's bed. 'Listen to me, Isola. The original *Beauty's* just an encouragement to young women to accept arranged marriages. What it's really saying to impressionable girls is, "Don't worry if your new husband is decades older than you, or ugly, or horrid. If you're sweet and obedient enough, you might just discover he's a prince in disguise!''

Mother's Most Lasting Advice

'*Never* be that girl, Isola. Never pick the beast or the wolf on the off-chance he won't devour you.'

Isola quickly learned the only stories Mother would never hesitate to tell were those written by Lileo Pardieu. Mother recited them from memory, translated from their original French.

Isola had been shocked to discover, when she finally received her rare and treasured bound book of Pardieu fables as a tenth birthday gift, that they were all slightly different to Mother's versions – and not in the way she expected. Mother had never sanitised her occasional forays into traditional bedtime fare – Goldilocks was gobbled up or broke her neck falling from the bears' upstairs window, and the woodsman was always too late to rescue Little Red Riding Hood. But she had altered Pardieu's stories slightly, alleviating the gloomy thread that ran through them; that truthful darkness that never sought to light candles, never tried to brighten the unhappy endings, to whitewash horror with morals. The stories were overwhelming reminders that evil begot evil, bad things often happened to good people and that villains often triumphed.

And, above all, that being a girl in a terrible world was akin to being a princess, wicked queen, heroine, ugly stepdaughter, witch and fairy and child and mother in one fiery package, a bomb beribboned like a beautiful gift and left to tick tock tick tock behind high castle walls.

And then, one day too soon, Mother had blown.

The enormous book was leather-bound and gold-gilded. It looked as though it had been knocked from a wild woman's bookshelf as the raging townsfolk ransacked her cottage and dragged her by her hair to the oil-doused stake in the village square. An inscription on the first page announced in curling copperplate:

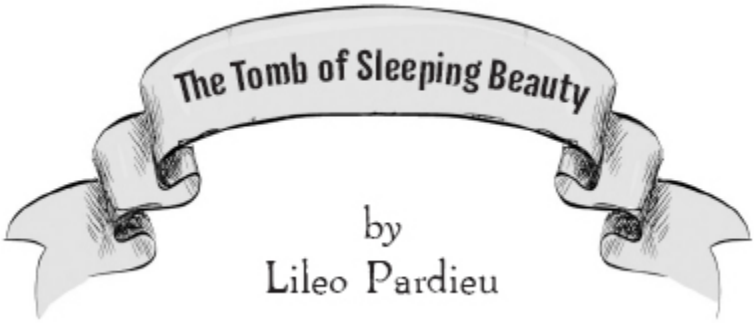
Dear Reader,
These stories, fables and memories are all true in one way or another.
These stories are about you and me.
These stories feature:
– girls who kill
– girls who are killed
– girls who are alive
– and girls who are otherwise.

Isola had always loved the last line, *girls who are otherwise*, as distinguished from simply 'dead'. Girls who are dead in all the ways a girl can be.

There was an author's photograph on the last page of the book. Lileo Pardieu sat on a love seat on a cottage porch, the smoke from her clove cigarette rising like hologram dragonflies. Eyes lined in black kohl, troll's blood. Severe black bob. Cyborg boots. An epilogue of narrowed eyes and crossed, skinny-frog limbs.

Lileo looked nothing like a fairytale – more like the ice queen in her carriage, swapping hearts for snow – and Isola wished, almost more than anything, almost more than Mother getting better, that she could plunge her fist into a slit in time and space, the tiny portal hidden in the book's spine, and drag Lileo Pardieu out by her coarse French hair. It would be slick like a birth, and Lileo and Isola like twins separated by decades and oceans and death. Reunited at last.

Isola ripped up grass blades, razing her early-morning tongue with her teeth as she searched, and finally settled on the first fairytale, which dealt with two of her favourite topics: death and princesses. The slight wind fell silent to listen, and she read aloud to the beglittered tree, like the visitor to the hospital patient.



A fairytale in reverse. The fate is Grimm. Faeries have no tails, anyway, only downy green skins, jewel eyes and endless riches.

The prince has the charming habit of locking princesses in his tower. His eyes are toxic, the colour of fairy hides, dewy witch-apples.

These are hieroglyphs.

Picture-words. You know this story.

Princess tower-locked, rope-haired, blood-lipped. Magic mirrors give poor advice, Cassandra truths. Thoughts of escape, but she'll never run fast enough on those glass feet.

Fairy godmother, green-skinned, ruby-eyed. She offers a silk dress and a thimbleful of faeriedust, not much and not nearly enough to fly with. But, oh, how she'll float.

Stepmother to the rescue. Dragons with throats full of soot. Arrows sail through the tower window. Roses etched along the shafts. Somebody loves her.

But stepmother tangles on the moat of roses. Body rots in the brambles.

Sleepless Beauty stays up late. Insomniac Beauty. Painted in the stars is poor advice, Cassandra truths. Her glass feet are starting to crack from all the pacing, all the prince's forced waltzes.

The silk dress is soon a shroud. The gold dust is in her eyes and she floats to the top of the tower room to find her courage hidden there, amongst the shadows and cobwebs.

The blue-eyed blonde fashions her braid into a noose, and all the towers are gallows, every cinderblock a storybook, telling the same tale of tragedy. After hours of creaking in the wind, her hair snaps, and the body tumbles. Roses at the tower base, the tomb of Wakeful Beauty. Asleep at last.

The bed of roses ever made a tomb for Sleeping Beauty.

No sooner are her glass toes thrust into the mud grave than the revolutions begin. Uprisings, fire and steel. The prince is lynched in the ballroom with the dead girl’s hair. Royalty’s a thing of the past. The kingdom chooses their monarch.

Naturally, they elect a wolf.

The Dead Girl – Part Deux

The dead girl from the woods was sitting in Isola's window, illuminated by the light of the Hindenburg moon.

Isola had only noticed the girl as a speck of Tinkerbell light; the moonbeams had caught something on her wrist, reflecting silver. The light danced on Isola's face and woke her, like a lighthouse attracting her attention, warning her of rocks and treacherous shorelines.

Isola threw off the tangle of sheets and sat up.

They each waited for the other to speak. The moon held her star-strewn breath.

'Hello, dead girl,' said Isola, ever the hostess.

'Hello, heartbeat girl,' said the uninvited guest. 'It's like a drum, it's so fucking loud. Turn it down, will you?'

Isola didn't know what to say. Ghosts often said strange things, as though conducting conversations half in dream, one foot hooked desperately in the doorway of the living world they'd been dragged so unceremoniously from. Sometimes they mistook Isola for old friends or enemies. Sometimes they entangled their fates with the red string of hers and she learned to call them brothers.

The dead girl perched on the windowsill and twisted sideways, settling into the frame more comfortably, her silhouette lit by moon- and neon street-light. A stockinged shadow puppet.

'You see ghosts, you strange little creature.' One striped leg swung down, kicking at Isola's bookcase. A pale mouth smirked. '*Eye-so-lah*. You must be pretty special.'

Isola shrugged. 'I just pay attention.'

The silver on the dead girl's wrist looked like a manacle, one half of handcuffs. The girl must have noticed Isola's gaze, for she lifted her wrist, the manacle jangling, and said, 'Come look.'

Warily, Isola climbed out of bed and examined the dead girl's wrist from the middle of the room.

'It's a charm bracelet,' said the dead girl proudly.

The charms showed the moon cycle cast in silver, each droplet dangling from the chain, singing when they clinked together. New, crescent, quarter, half, gibbous, full, waxing and waning round her wrist.

'It's beautiful,' said Isola. 'What's your name?'

'It is, isn't it?' The girl ignored the question and instead smiled at the bracelet. 'My mother gave it to me.'

'Oh.' Most of her face was still hidden behind her dark hair, but the girl looked as thin as Death on a diet, and her broken voice crackled like sweets unwrapping. Rosekin and the other faeries' dramatic death-tale was reliable for once. Huh. That was a first.

'So what's your name?' Isola ventured again. Ghosts liked to talk about themselves, she had found; their histories and faces and names were all they had left in the world. 'I'm Isola.'

'I know *that*, weren't you even listening?' the dead girl snapped, thudding her fist to the windowsill. 'I thought you were supposed to be *smart*!'

'I'm sorry,' said Isola, although she wasn't. Alejandro had always advised her to tiptoe through conversations with ghosts she didn't know – some were liable to explosive rage and violence, and it was best to assume they all were at first. Stranger danger, spirit-style.

The dead girl, as if bored with Isola's company, contorted into a crouch, preparing to spring from the windowsill. 'Well, if you're really a smart girl after all . . .' She tilted her head and smiled back at Isola.

The moon lit the black hollow where her eye had once been.

'. . . you'll stay out of the damn woods.'

Little Voices

‘Where’ve you been all weekend?’

‘Why?’ Alejandro touched her hair, disturbing it slightly. ‘Did you miss me, *querida*?’

Isola immediately smoothed her hair back down. ‘No,’ she scowled, ‘I had a visitor.’

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. Isola rubbed it clean.

Alejandro had permanent dark circles under his eyes, like Isola often woke with when she slept with mascara on. They had matching wobbly colt legs, except Alejandro was skinny from a youth spent on drugs. The stunning clothes he wore – the clothes he died in – were the height of Victorian dandy fashion. Every day he changed his appearance slightly, although the simple fact he was dead left him permanently unchanging. He sometimes tied his crushed-grape cravat – the only colour on him – to hold back his hair, or wore it like an ascot or an armband. He arranged the diamond pins on his laced cuffs and coat pockets in differing patterns, sometimes mirroring the movement of the stars. On Isola’s last birthday, he’d arranged the diamond pins to read ‘16’ on his starched black lapels.

Wordlessly, he took her schoolbag and carried it as they ventured through Vivien’s Wood. Forever the gentleman.

‘And may I enquire as to whom you have replaced me with?’

‘If I was going to replace you, I’d pick someone a little livelier than *her* – the girl we saw last week. The dead one in the cage.’

Alejandro stiffened. ‘What did she want?’

‘Well, first she asked me to turn the volume of my heartbeat down. Then she told me to stay out of the damn woods.’

Alejandro tugged nervously on his silk cravat.

‘I’ll do neither,’ declared Isola, shaking out her ice-blonde hair. ‘It’s my heart, and my woods. I was here first.’

‘I do not like this, Isola.’ Creases of worry braided Alejandro’s eyebrows together. ‘If Rosekin is right about . . . about what happened, a death like that can do things to people. Twist them.’

Isola could remember that protruding leg and cramped cage all too well. She shivered then said brusquely, ‘Since when did Rosekin know anything about anything?’

‘You would do well to heed the stories of faeries, Isola,’ Alejandro admonished. ‘Their voices might be faint, but their words are tall indeed.’

Isola only shrugged. She didn’t want to believe it was true – but she’d seen the hollow eye socket, heard the scratched voice like an ancient recording of a girl talking. ‘What happened to the body?’

‘I left it. The unicorns will finish it off.’

‘That’s cruel,’ muttered Isola.

‘She is already dead, *querida*. Crueller to let the herd starve another winter, I think.’

❄

At St Dymphna’s, Grape had made a triumphantly late start to the term, and she carried her arm, bent crooked by the thick plaster cast, as though it were some precious baby bird.

‘Seven days in bed? For *this*?’ Isola teased.

‘I’ve not wasted it,’ said Grape, affronted. ‘I had to become ambidextrous.’

For the whole day, Grape wrote notes with her left hand. She took a great deal of badly concealed joy out of handing worksheets scribbled with shapes and nonsense to teachers, even though each nun told her in exasperation that she didn’t *have* to hand in anything at all. But Grape only took this as a challenge, and started on a maths sheet with a pen clamped between her teeth.

Isola spent the afternoon art class drawing idly on Grape’s cast: bunches of rotund purple grapes for her namesake, faeries in bubblegum-glow, an empty birdcage . . .

‘I wish you’d seen it,’ Grape was saying. ‘It was so funny – I ran up and pushed Majella into the pool, and then she jumped out and chased me, and I

ran up the stairs and *whack*, right into Ellie Blythe Nettle – remember her? – then I fell *down* the stairs, everyone loved it, it was hilarious, my arm was killing me but I kind of drank too much and forgot about it.'

'Sorry I missed it.'

'You shouldn't always run off like that! People will start suspecting.'

'Suspecting what?'

Grape gave a Cheshire-cat grin. 'That you're Batman. Duh.'

Grape was the only good thing about St Dymphna's. Isola had not been raised religiously; her baptism occurred to pacify the grumblings of her devout grandmother, who had since winged her way up to the strictly conservative heaven she'd never found on earth. Father had chosen to send Isola to St Dymphna's after a spate of teen pregnancies at the local comprehensive; Catholic schoolgirls apparently didn't ever get pregnant or even look sideways at boys. Besides, Mother had gone to St Dympha's and hadn't she turned out all right?

Isola's first day of nun-infested single-sex pro-abstinence anti-Darwin anti-Isola school had gone like this:

The school: a converted nunnery with secret bomb shelters from the Second World War and heritage-listed staircases that led nowhere; a funhouse of stained-glass windows and asbestos under the floorboards.

In the well-manicured front gardens stood a stunning fountain dedicated to the memory of the cruellest of the nuns, who Mother Wilde had remembered as a teacher when she was a student there.

'And *horrible* she was too. She bruised my knuckles on my very first day,' she'd whispered, when Isola had come into Mother's permanently darkened bedroom to say her goodbyes before school and ended up cocooned under the sheets with her.

'How come?'

Mother's eyes, bruised with sleep, had widened slightly. 'You know, it could have been any number of things.'

Beyond the magical man-repelling gate, in the convent gardens, three princes had been waiting to wish good lucks and goodbyes. Of course, this was a one-time-only allowance, given Alejandro's usual stance on Isola's non-Nimuean world, but he recognised that she needed someone fairer-sexed to squeeze her clammy hand goodbye.

Ruslana stood by the fountain, her silver breastplate glinting in the sun and her braided hair roiling down her back.

A bubble of pink light, Rosekin, hovered at her shoulder; Christobelle's golden scales glimmered in the water of the fountain, tye-dyed pink at the tail's fringe.

'You'll be fine,' said Ruslana, bending to tug the pleats in Isola's plaid skirt straight.

'Stomp on anyone who's mean to you!' squeaked Rosekin. Stomping was her answer to all Big Problems; she had always assumed that anything bothersome could be squished underfoot by such large creatures as humans.

'Good luck, my darling,' cooed Christobelle, blowing a kiss inside a bubble out of the fountain. Isola reached out to catch it and it popped wet and lovely in her palm.

Dramatis Personae

CHRISTOBELLE: The fourth prince. A beautiful mermaid and possible serial killer obsessed with romance, despite the consequences of her own tragic love story.

Rosekin flew a loop-de-loop around Isola's head, and Ruslana gave her school tie a final nervous tug.

'And don't do anything I wouldn't do,' warned Ruslana.

Isola looked quizzically up at the towering woman. 'But there's nothing you wouldn't do.'

A grin split Ruslana's black lips. 'Exactly.'

Isola had never learnt to call them *sisters* – a sister was a wicked nun who smacked Mother's hands, and a sister in a fairytale was almost always evil. And so, Ruslana, Christobelle and Rosekin had remained brother-princes to Isola. Protectors who watched with proud wet eyes as their little sister-princess shouldered her schoolbag and assimilated into the steady stream of uniformed girls.

Isola's first encounter with authority went predictably. In one long breath a brick-shaped nun – Sister Katherine Vincent, later Sister K to Isola – commented on the state of her hair, the length of her skirt, and the height of her socks, *which are mismatched by the way, young lady, do you want*

detention on your very first day you are a representative of this school what a terrible first impression you make.

'What's your name?'

'Regan,' said Isola sweetly. 'You know, like the girl in *The Exorcist.*'

Isola couldn't stand horror films – they always seemed to find a way into her dreams whenever she dared watch them through her fingers – and she had never even seen *The Exorcist*, but was wily enough to employ a little pop-culture Satanism when threatened by one of Christ's wrinkly brides.

Unlocked Hearts

Isola waited in her usual spot on High Street for Grape's bus to arrive so they could walk the last ten minutes to school together.

The bus stop was in a sleazy part of town, and was situated in front of an industrial-looking club called The G Spot. They rarely checked IDs here, and it was a commonly held belief that the only number that mattered to the doorman was not your age, but your bra size.

Next to the club was a dingy old town hall that now masqueraded as a holy place; the neon sign over the doorway, reminiscent of a sleazy hotel, announced it as the 'Church of the Unlocked Heart'.

A lone man with gelled-down hair and an armful of paper fixed her in his sharky gaze just before the bus drove up. The pin on his collar showed the church's symbol – a red heart with a golden keyhole in the centre. No sooner had they locked eyes than a pamphlet was being pressed into her hands, and Isola resisted the urge to chuck it into the gutter.

'Hey, have you heard about our church?' the man said, his smile seemingly stickered-on. 'You, miss, look like you could use a little saving.'

'I'm happy with my bank, thanks,' said Isola, sidestepping the man as Grape hopped off the bus amidst the sea of blue-plaid dresses.

He fastened his white fingers around her wrist, shocking her, and said, 'You need to be saved, witch.'

'Gertrude!' Grape called in a put-upon accent. 'Darling! It's me, Millicent! Oh, what have I told you about your wild church-joining habit?' She snatched the pamphlet, tsking as she looked down her nose at its contents. 'Gertrude, Gertrude – fifth one this week, dear! Restrain yourself – remember your twelve-step program!' Crushing the pamphlet in her fist and tossing it towards the public dustbin, Grape linked her arm with Isola's and pulled her away, telling the man quite sternly over her shoulder, 'And you, *sir*, are an enabler!'

Cake, Grass, Glasses: An Interlude

Unlike most people in Avalon, Mieko Grace Tomoyaki wasn't christened at birth. For one, her parents were Shinto Buddhists, and for another, she received her name at the age of eight.

A fortnight after she'd first moved into the village, an inexplicable letter with hyperactive font arrived in the mail – it was an invitation to some girl's eighth birthday party. Her name was Isola Wilde.

Mother Wilde had turned Mother Goose and invited the lonely new girl on her daughter's behalf. Grace clutched Father Tomoyaki's hand nervously as a woman and young girl greeted her at the gate.

'Hi!' said the birthday girl, bouncing on the balls of her feet. 'I'm Alice Liddell!'

'No, you're not, Isola. Hello, Grace, I'm so glad you could come!' Mother motioned Grace's father towards a lawn chair. 'Mr Tomoyaki, please, sit down –'

'I'm kidding, I'm Isola.' The birthday girl beamed at the Japanese wallflower. 'I love your glasses.'

Grace tugged self-consciously at her newly fitted spectacles and didn't answer, as though the little glass circles were walls, not windows.

'Do you like purple, too?' Isola's saucer eyes grew rounder. 'Oh! They're grape-coloured! Like your name, Grape!'

'It's not *Grape*,' corrected Mother Wilde. 'It's Grace.'

Grace giggled, and from that moment on it *was* Grape. Grape, the new girl from Japan with the glasses and the shyness. Now she was Grape Tomoyaki with the motor mouth and sleek black bob. She still had purple-framed glasses and she was still Isola Wilde's best friend, and the name had stuck so steadfastly that even the essays she got back from teachers were marked with a red X, exasperated corrections and scrawled notes saying, 'GRAPE, SEE ME AFTER CLASS.'

The Children of Nimue

Growing up, Mother Wilde had never been allowed a birthday party. Her own devout mother insisted the only person special and sinless enough to deserve an annual celebration was the baby Jesus. As an adult, Mother Wilde became famous in Avalon for throwing beautiful birthday parties for her only daughter – green lawns in high summer and sumptuous cakes frosted with Isola's newly achieved age. Mother Wilde invited everyone.

Isola's last birthday party had been her tenth. Mother was too sickly afterwards – after what happened.

But, in Isola's memory, the parties raged on. One of her favourites was her fifth. It was faerie-themed – the traditional kind, with traditional spelling – and all the girls wore floral crowns handcrafted by Mother, and the boys held kingly corsages and brandished Oberon sceptres.

Isola was busy greeting guests at the letterbox while Mother was ferrying the gifts to an ever-growing pile on a trestle table.

Mama Sinclair, the rotund Scottish nurse who lived at Number Thirty-nine, arrived wearing a floral sundress and a grin as wide as a loch. She had an enormous bosom and gave vigorous hugs, and that day she squashed Isola against her breasts even tighter than usual.

After the initial panic of torn paper and shredded ribbons, when all Isola's gifts were laid out on the grass for the other children to examine and play with, Isola noticed Mama Sinclair in a chair. She was sitting in the generous shade of the then-thriving plum tree, fanning herself with one chubby hand and cradling a small pink box in the other.

'Come, look what I have here for you!' she called, and Isola tottered over, plopping down at Mama Sinclair's feet expectantly.

Wolfishly, Isola tore at the package Mama Sinclair handed her to reveal a tarnished silver jewellery box.

‘Oh, that’s beautiful!’ said Mother Wilde, standing over Isola, a silhouette in the strong sunlight. ‘Say thank you.’

‘Thank you,’ parroted Isola.

‘It plays music, too,’ beamed Mama Sinclair. ‘Go on, Isola.’

Isola opened the box, and what drifted out wasn’t mechanised music, but a tiny globe of furious pink. It zoomed right up to the tip of her nose, poked a freckle and said loudly, ‘Gosh, you’re big, too. You’re almost as big as Mama Sinclair!’

‘Here,’ said Mother, lifting the music box from Isola’s slack grasp, ‘you’ve got to wind it . . . Oh, how lovely!’

The mechanism ground out a cog-and-clinkers lullaby – an unfamiliar tune that they all intrinsically knew somehow, as if it had soundtracked their dreams – and a tiny girl with diaphanous wings fluttered round and round Isola’s head, inspecting her. Isola watched speechlessly. She’d never seen a creature like it.

‘I’ll take it inside, Isola, it’s too precious,’ said Mother as the tinkling refrain repeated. ‘It’s wonderful, Mama Sinclair.’

The moment she left, Mama Sinclair gave a great boom of laughter, her bosom wobbling generously. ‘I *knew* it,’ she said. ‘The look on your face, Isola Wilde! I’m never wrong about these things. You’re one o’ Nimue’s bairn, all right.’

Isola didn’t understand the phrasing, but the intent was as plain as the winged girl between her eyes.

‘How . . . How did you –?’

Mama Sinclair tapped her nose. ‘I’ve seen ’em gatherin’, the Children floatin’ in an’ out o’ your window . . .’

‘You mean the princes?’ said Isola, before clamping her hands over her mouth, an involuntary reaction; Father always grew angry when she mentioned them.

‘Princes, you say? You call ’em that? We call ’em Children o’ Nimue.’

Isola shifted into a kneel. ‘Children of who?’

‘Nimue! You haven’t heard o’ Nimue? You live right by her beautiful woodland.’

‘But that’s Vivien’s Wood.’

‘She’s had many names, ol’ Nimue.’ Mama Sinclair slapped her creaking knee and leaned forward. ‘Nimue and Vivien are one an’ the same. The old

legends called her the Lady o' the Lake, a creature o' magic an' mystery. Merlin loved her, and Vivien – Nimue – made the ol' wizard teach her all his trickery, and then she lured him to an enchanted forest, and trapped him in an ancient oak tree.'

'In *that* forest?' Isola pointed to the woodland, eyes wide.

'Perhaps,' said Mama Sinclair, her eyes twinkling. 'You never know. It's said her Children spring from the place where the Lake meets the Tree. Creatures of magic, nevertheless, and they may tell you they're ghosts or fae or pixies or goblins or sirens or what 'ave you. And sometimes, they're people – people like me an' you, pet. This wee Child o' Nimue –' she held out her finger, which the pink bubble alighted upon, resuming its girl-shape '– is Rosekin. She's o' the fae-kind.'

'Fay-kind?'

'A faerie, dear.'

Rosekin curtsied her little leaf-skirt, her pointed features grinning at Isola, her toes and ears and eyes included.

'I like you,' said the faerie loudly. 'Do you like me?'

'Um . . . yes.'

'You have a lovely garden.'

'Thanks. My mum –'

'Yes,' said Rosekin dreamily, 'it looks *so* delicious.' She fluttered off Mama Sinclair's hand and landed on Isola's knee, where she promptly curled up and began biting her own toenails.

'Rosekin has kept me company these many years – and I've been keepin' her belly full.' Mama Sinclair chuckled. 'But I'll be goin' soon, an' I thought you could use another – what did you call it? Ah, a *prince*.'

Isola looked nervously down at the grubby faerie girl. Rosekin removed her big toe from her mouth and announced, 'I'm hungry.'

'What do you eat?'

'My favourite's honeysuckle.'

Isola looked at Mama Sinclair.

'Just flowers, lass. The prettier the better. She doesn't eat much. Just make sure no-one mistakes her for a pest and sprays poisons!' She got up out of the plastic chair, stretched and paused to watch the dappled shade shifting over her hands for a moment. 'Be good, Rosekin, my little pest,' she said,

smiling. ‘And happy birthday, Isola Wilde.’ She patted Rosekin’s tiny head with her fingertip, Isola’s head with her hand, and then turned to leave.

‘Where are you going, Mama Sinclair?’ Isola called. ‘I mean, so you can’t be with Rosekin anymore?’

The rotund lady from Number Thirty-nine turned back and chuckled. ‘Oh bless, my wee Child o’ Nimue – I’m going home!’

❄

A fortnight later Mama Sinclair was buried in the High Cemetery, on a bald hill overlooking the village. She wore her orthopaedic nursing shoes and her Florence Nightingale portrait-pin on her bosom. At her funeral, her husband, the future Boo Radley, spoke at length about her struggle with illness. ‘They always call it a battle, a fight against cancer, but my beautiful wife didn’t believe in war.’ He described her garden, the dirt ingrained in her wrinkles and how she somehow kept flowers blooming year-round. He spoke about her earthy spirituality and her love for animals and children, for hugging and gift-giving, for Vivien’s Wood.

In the third pew from the back, Isola thought of her huge squashing breasts and a music box with a secret faerie inside. A human Child of Nimue gone from lake to tree to earth again.

Rosekin was sobbing tiny pink tears in Isola’s dress pocket.

Isola had only been to one other funeral before – her grandmother’s, when she was four.

‘Don’t worry,’ Mother had said thickly at that occasion, tears trickling over the ridge of her lips as she’d rubbed Isola’s back consolingly, ‘she died in her sleep.’

Mother had only meant that Grandmother hadn’t passed in pain, but that night, Isola had lain awake, too frightened to close her eyes. Her blankets had been drawn up to her chin, and shadows had played puppet theatre on the walls.

‘Ale,’ Isola had said in a Mother-proof whisper, ‘what happens if I die in my sleep?’

The summoned spectre had come when called, but couldn’t reassure her that he wouldn’t let that happen. Before she could upset herself any further,

he’d reached into his breast pocket and withdrew two strange, golden coins.

‘To pay the ferryman, *querida*,’ he’d said simply, placing them on her bedside table. ‘In case you die in your sleep.’

The funeral had been grand and stoney, with impassive Jesus in the window, his face broken into coloured glass. Grandmother had looked so strange in the casket, her make-up painted far too thickly. Grandmother herself would have sneered and said she looked like one of those *street-corner unfortunates*.

Isola had slipped Father’s wallet into the casket before the lid had closed, hoping that paper money would be enough to buy a one-way boat ride.

Mama’s Sinclair’s funeral was earthy and sweet-smelling, and under their black coats people wore vibrant colours. At the burial, Isola fingered the cool coins in her pocket that Alejandro had given her all those years ago. She hadn’t realised, not for years and years, what precious things these were – the last gift from his own small sisters. Isola tossed a snippet of honeysuckle into Mama Sinclair’s deep grave, two coins from her own piggybank hidden in the blossom.

Rosekin

Tick Tock

A shriek. A thud in the earth.

‘*They’re eating my time!*’

Isola shouldered her schoolbag and hurried out the front door. ‘What is it?’

‘My thyme! Those pesky rabbits!’ cried Mother Wilde, rubbing her forehead with a gloved hand. ‘They’ll be into the rosemary next, just you watch.’

She slammed a garden hoe into the dirt again, raging against the creatures that nibbled up her herbs. Isola caught sight of dusty bobtails vanishing into the scrub. One pure black rabbit dived recklessly under the porch of Edgar Allan Poe’s new house. She hadn’t seen the boy in a while; she left for school much earlier than him, and didn’t emerge from the woods until the sky had darkened.

‘Ooh, those rabbits! I know you love them, Isola, but I swear, if I catch them –’ she throttled the air ‘– I’ll wring their adorable little necks and make adorable bunny soup!’

Isola kissed Mother on her way down the garden path. When she reached the front gate her smile wilted – as the garden did at its edges these days. She was both pleased and despairing to see Mother this way. On one hand, it was wonderful to see her out of the house, working on her long-abandoned project. The unwalled secret garden was not the Eden it once was.

But Isola knew that the manic stage would pass soon enough, and the longer it lasted, the deeper Mother would sink when it ended. Swinging high always meant falling low in the circus of her life. Today, Mother might be the trapeze artist, her sequinned torso glittering in the spotlight, flying high above her illness, but tomorrow she could well be the cockroach

crushed under the ringleader’s boots, squashed juiceless under the strain of being sad.

Lately in the Wilde house, the swings had become more extreme, a pendulum gathering speed. Soon, Isola feared, the clock would once more stop altogether.

❄

By the time she’d kicked off her shoes in the hallway after school that afternoon, Isola knew that the pendulum had swung.

Yesterday’s dishes were stacked high in the sink. The house was unwelcoming, celibate; the kitchen cold with uncooked dinner.

‘How was school, then?’ Father asked from the lounge room, his perfunctory question accompanied by the flutter of turning newspaper pages.

‘Grape and I faked cramps to get out of P.E.,’ said Isola, stopping in the doorway and shrugging at him. ‘But Sister K said we used that excuse last week, so I guess the nuns are tracking our periods now.’

From upstairs came the familiar waterfall. The sounds of Mother stripping in the bathroom.

Father turned the television on, pressing the volume control like an addict on a morphine drip. Louder louder louder, the noise shackling Isola’s ankles as she trudged her way upstairs. The aural riot tried its hardest to tug her down the stairs, to ignore Mother the way that Father chose to.

Isola allowed her gaze to rise skyward as she peeked through the ceiling with the X-ray vision she wished she had. Perhaps if she stared hard enough she could see through the ceramic tub, through Mother’s sun-speckled skin, to find the sadness that roosted in the red stew of her tragic guts, the depression that festered like tumours. She could shrink them with kisses, cut them out with razor-sharp lips like Ruslana’s.

It was no secret that Mother was mentally ill. She had only gotten worse since Isola’s birth.

Sometimes, very late at night, if she pressed her thumbs into her eyes and concentrated, making pictures in the electric shudders of colour that burst there, Isola remembered being inside Mother’s womb. The stucco pink

walls were lined with stars, the mapped cosmos; soft gooey blush like the inside of a clam, and she was the grain of sand becoming the pearl.

Mother had other baby pearls brewing before, but instead of hardening they had softened, melting through the porous walls. She took care of these babies too, but nobody knew: she cradled them internally, secretly squished between her organs, padding her ageing joints, collecting in her brain stem. These were seedlings, saplings, never to blossom, never to become trees.

Isola was born to tears spilling from all eyes except hers. She never cried, never made so much as a squeak of befuddlement, and the nurses plunged her airways again and again, looking for the obstruction that didn't exist.

'A quiet little princess you've got, Mrs Wilde,' the nurse said, beaming. Isola was finally planted into Mother's sweat-drenched arms: tiny, wrinkled hands flexing; crusted eyes blue through the gunk; hair like she'd been licked by the unicorns, frothy above her bothered-looking face.

'My princess,' gasped Mother, flooded with pain-drugs and love-drugs. 'My Isola.'

Isola pushed open the bathroom door to reveal the gentle shafts of chandelier light, inhaling the gel and soap and candle scents.

Her mother was in the claw-footed bathtub, hidden behind the Japanese-print screen, visible in pieces, a triptych; her toes at one end, at the other a twist of dark hair, pinned up. In between was a slinky silhouette, breasts and knees.

Isola went to the porcelain bathtub, kissed Mother's flushed cheek like she always did, dipped her fingers in to check the temperature (usually boiling past most people's endurance), and asked if she needed anything.

'A doctor to double the dosage,' sighed Mother, and then she laughed, lifting her pointed ballerina-foot out of the tub, soapy water dripping and spotting the bath rug. Isola saw her Mother's whole life there – in the corns on her soles; the floaty-violet nail polish, slightly chipped; the dyed string anklet, woven on the shores of some faraway honeymoon beach.

'Tell me a story, won't you, Isola?'

It seemed to be one of the few comforting things Isola could administer to Mother; her voice, shaping the clay of a story, a tale that always had a happy ending. Isola didn't think she was much of a storyteller, but she drew inspiration from Lileo Pardieu's words, a vampire drinking in inky blood, and she wove tales until the bathwater ran lukewarm.

Isola loved Mother so much it hurt. The pain only worsened when Mother was hurting. When she was sad, Mother Wilde was a Greek tragedy. She would stay in her bed all day, and got in the bath at odd hours, soaking instead of sleeping, trying in vain to soften the tightly wound cogs inside.

A tealight candle floated past her fingers, and Isola stirred up a wave for it to travel on, a tiny tempest in the tub.

‘Once upon a time,’ said Isola quietly, ‘there was a boy called Alejandro, who loved his sister very much.’

The Boy – A Second Glance

As autumn marched through the valley like an army clad in cottony russet, most of the tinsel strips fluttered loose from the plum tree, and leaves had browned and dropped. The tree looked as though it was undressing; a sad old stripper unveiling her bones to an apathetic crowd.

Clutching the Pardieu fables, Isola went to settle herself at the roots. Her usual spot, however, was taken.

Something furry was lumped there, wheezing slightly. She leaned over the creature, its eyes shuttered tight. Purple stained its mouth, and there were soured plums clutched in its paws.

‘Are you the little fellow who’s been eating all of Mum’s thyme?’ Isola asked the woozy black rabbit. She picked up a nibbled plum, all shrivelled on the inside. ‘Sorry, little bunny, but it’s bad fruit.’ Isola stretched her fingers to stroke its floppy ears.

Two things happened instantaneously. The rabbit bolted awake at her touch, bared its teeth at her – a horror-mouthful of black fangs – and hissed venomously. Then a scream echoed around the court, as bright and high as stars.

Isola sprang to her feet. The scream had come from across the road. The black rabbit darted through a scrub of dandelion clocks, whooshes of white ballooning up in his wake as he tore off towards the woods.

More screams. Her imagination sprouted feathers and flew – flew to the forest where the corpse had hung, to the window where the girl ghost had threatened her. *Stay out of the woods*.

Isola ran across to Number Thirty-seven; the shouts were coming from the backyard. Holding tightly to her fairytale book, a knight’s shield, she crept around the side of the house, squeezing close to the wire fence, leaning forward so as not to catch her hair.

Yet another scream swirled with secondary flavour now. Laughter. It sounded like children – the littlest Poes. She exhaled with relief and turned to make good her escape.

‘Who are *you*?’

Isola looked down in surprise at the owner of the grumpy voice. A sandy-haired boy blocked her path and glared up at her from under an obviously mother-cut fringe.

‘I’m Isola,’ she replied, as cheerfully as she could. She had never been good with children; she found it difficult faking the constant sunniness. ‘Is everything all right here?’

‘It was just fine until *you* started snooping around,’ said the po-faced little Poe. ‘Who invited you, anyway?’

‘I did, you creep.’

Isola spun around. Edgar Allan Poe had joined them in the narrow channel beside the house.

‘C’mon, Annabel Lee,’ said Edgar cheerfully, and it wasn’t faked at all.

‘She said her name’s *Isola*, retard,’ intoned the boy, with an exaggerated rolling of eyes.

She paused at the sight of the spacious backyard, also scattered with kids’ toys and half-built furniture. Garden tools and an upended tree sapling circled a great crater in the middle of the yard.

‘Move it!’ snapped the boy, shoving his way past her. ‘Dumb blonde!’

‘Hey!’ Edgar made a snatch for his shoulder as the boy ran past. ‘Little brat. . .’ He turned back to Isola, and that remarkably natural smile was still there. ‘Come to complain about the noise, hey, neighbour?’

She crossed her arms. ‘I thought you were being murdered.’

‘And you were dashing over to save us? Mighty brave of you. And you didn’t even bring a weapon!’ He wiped his dirt-smeared hands on his jeans, peering at the gilded French title on her storybook. ‘Unless that brick counts? Less fables –’

‘*Les Fables et les Contes de Fées de Pardieu*. It means, “The Pardieu Fables and Fairytales”.’’

‘Oh, cool.’

‘You know them?’

‘Never heard of ’em.’

‘You’re kidding! You don’t know Lileo Pardieu? Any of her stories?’ Isola rattled off a few titles to his increasingly bewildered face. ‘*Lady of the Unicorns? The Seventh Princess? Talismans? The Wolf Prince*?’

‘Edgar!’ shrieked a small girl who was bouncing on a trampoline and surveying the vast woodland behind the house with every jump. Isola recognised her piercing pitch: the screamer. ‘Edgar, I can see them! They’re running into the trees!’

‘What happened?’ asked Isola.

‘Come look.’ Edgar led her over to the crater in the yard. She expected to find a pulsing meteor or a NASA-stamped fallen satellite, but all she saw was a network of half-collapsed catacombs.

‘We tried to plant an apple tree for Mum and accidentally caved in a rabbit burrow. They all came scrambling out like fluffy zombies – Portia flipped. That’s her,’ he added, pointing at the bouncing girl with brunette pigtails whipping the air like helicopter blades. ‘She’s six. You met Cassio, he’s ten. Don’t worry, he hates everyone.’

Isola had never looked at Edgar this closely in natural light. He matched his slouch with a nervous air, like a groom left at the altar forever ago. She envisioned a beautiful girl trailing lace and a honey-gold veil as she ran down the aisle, leaving Edgar alone in his rented suit, a lilac in his buttonhole, a chip on his shoulder.

His face was a ghost story: graveyard eyes, cheekbones as sharp as urban legends, a sealed-coffin mouth. The grin was not forced, but seemed so out of place. Isola didn’t understand how he did it. For her, trying to force happiness was like slipping on a ring a size too small – she’d spend the rest of the day trying to pull it off.

‘This is the girl from Number Thirty-six, Portia,’ announced Edgar. ‘The house with the shiny tree you like so much. She says her name’s Annabel Lee.’

‘It’s not. I’m Isola,’ she called.

‘Edgar drew you,’ said Portia matter-of-factly, with the honesty of the innocent. ‘In his book; I know, I *saw*.’ She stopped bouncing and sunk into the mat, her windswept pigtails settling over her shoulders, and added, ‘I think he *likes* you!’

Wings and Wanderings

Mother was crying so softly, like the overtures before a musical. Isola opened her music box and listened to the nameless tune – it had no company branding, no scrawl to number the opera the melody had been borrowed from – and waited for the noise in the walls to grow silent.

Late night telly – the insomniac's battleground. The newsreaders were still wearing roses in their lapels, a smidgen of extra blush settling in the hollows of their cheeks. They were discussing the previous month's teen suicide, and its tragic broadcast by a morally bankrupt rival network. They were making a list of Things We Must Do, strapping on their preaching armour in the quest to save the youth from themselves, thudding their fists against the desk, firing off bulletpoints. Bullying drugs sex depression divorce the internet the media the government the filth they play on that wicked rival network, all of it to blame!

Isola went downstairs for a glass of water. Father was awake, jaundiced in the streetlight and staring out the living-room window at the dolled-up plum tree. His arms were clasped behind his back and he looked uncomfortable as he always did when faced with proof of Isola's eccentricities. Isola knew he grew doubly cross whenever Mother encouraged it.

She waited until he closed the curtain and padded back to his bed before she crept mouse-quiet upstairs, tugging her dressing gown closer.

She wasn't sure why she bothered to sneak about. He never noticed anything.

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Walking to school the next day, Isola was starting to think that the unicorns had moved on. They had been endangered in this forest for some time now. She would not blame the stragglers if they followed on.

She tried not to think about the cage with the body inside, the bony leg protruding like a bleached-white clue. A dead girl was here, somewhere in the tangling gloom and Grimm. But she was supposed to forget about it, according to Alejandro and the others. Nothing doing now.

Her footsteps crackled in the leaves, and she pretended she was clad in a gown of flame, her train fanning out, devouring the solitude of the forest. She loved these woods, the thick undergrowth and hammocks of spiderwebs.

In Vivien's Wood were dangerous creatures that had never sought human contact, like each of her brothers had. At best, they were indifferent to humans like her, and the princes urged Isola to never speak with them while she was alone.

There were wild swans that transformed into beautiful young men in the moonlight. Isola had long been warned that they would try and trick her into kissing them, and through her lips steal seven years of her semi-precious life.

The wood imps were out today – these little straw men resembled voodoo dolls and lived underground, only coming up when Jupiter was visible in the night sky. She could hear them snuffling through the grass. The smoking feathers of phoenixes wafted ash from their secret tree-hollows.

Vivien's was an eternally dark forest, and even Isola sometimes confused her way in the maze. She only knew she had reached the centre of the woods when she found certain landmarks. They were –

The Devil's Tea Party: A ring of toxic toadstools circling a small clearing where the canopy was as thin as gauze.

The Wish-You-Well: Not a wishing well, but a natural pond where the water was perfectly clear and where Christobelle liked to sun herself.

Vigour Mortis: A beautiful tree that looked different every time Isola saw it, and, like her plum tree, appeared periodically close to death. The next day, however, it would be fit to bursting with life, and she only recognised it because of the bells she had tied to the lowest boughs with thick ruby ribbons.

The Bridge of Sighs: A tree sprouting sideways out of another, the parasite twin, its topmost branches sinking into the earth. A mossy archway to another dimension.

By the Bridge of Sighs was where Isola had first found it. The cage, strung high in an old oak tree. The outline of a girl stuffed unceremoniously inside it.

Now, finding herself under the bridge, she looked up. Nothing but a rope, its ends chewed and frayed. No body – the unicorns would probably have got to her by now, as Alejandro had predicted.

But there was no cage, either.

Wilde Child

Like most obsessions, Isola Wilde's began with a story.

Mother was retelling a Pardieu fairytale called *The Seventh Princess*. The seventh-born child of an adored King and Queen, their first daughter, had been kidnapped by a tribe of treasure-loving dragons. She would be eaten up within the week if the royal family did not pay a ransom of everything gold in their kingdom.

The King and Queen offered all the gold in their vaults immediately – they could put no price on their precious daughter's life.

'But they soon discovered it was an impossible ask,' said Mother, in her dramatic storyteller cadence, 'because theirs was a fair-haired kingdom by the sea, of hilltops drenched in golden wildflowers and beaches of sand, and the dragons coveted *everything* gold – the yellow hair scalped from the peasants, the golden flowers hacked at their stems, every last grain of sand stolen from the dunes, not to mention every ray of sunshine that fell on their little seaside kingdom.'

'Greedy dragons,' commented chubby-cheeked four-year-old Isola. 'Poor people. They'd have to live bald *and* in the dark!'

'Not to mention without flowers, and isn't *that* a terrible way to live?' Mother smoothed Isola's hair on the pillow and continued, 'Luckily for the seventh-born princess, she had been blessed with six older brothers, or, as they put it, they had been blessed with her.

'The first brother-prince, the bravest, told the King and Queen: "I will save our kingdom's greatest treasure. I need nothing but your blessing." The second brother-prince, loving, stepped forward and said, "You'll also need us." Following him was the third brother, strong-willed and calm; the fourth brother, honest and kind; the fifth brother, thoughtful and trusting; and the sixth brother, musical and talkative.

‘The King and Queen quietly despaired, but gave their sons their blessing – without it, they feared the royal children would not return. The sons had pledged to find their sister-princess, who was infinitely more precious than gold, trapped in the scaly clutches of the dragons, and rescue her with their swords and their combined skills, altogether more useful than treasure.’

Already Isola’s eyelids were sliding over her dewy baby-blues. Her fingers tangled in her hair, curls as fine as a seahorse fringe.

‘Goodnight, Isola. We’ll read more tomorrow.’

Isola managed to keep herself awake for the few minutes it took to direct her inquiry to the secret friend she’d known only for a few weeks.

‘Hey, Ale?’

A ripple in the dark, a pebble plummeting to the bottom of a pool. The sudden warmth of sharing a space with another person, of no longer being alone.

‘Yes, Miss Wilde?’ She wasn’t *querida* in those days – he didn’t even yet dare call her Isola.

‘Alehan-doh –’ she, in turn, had mispronounced his name ‘– what’s a brother? Is it the same as a prince?’

‘In a way, yes. A brother is someone who protects,’ said Alejandro, sitting at the end of her bed.

‘And a sister?’

‘A little princess who needs protecting. A girl like you.’

She rolled over and jutted out her chin. ‘I don’t *need* protecting!’

‘No.’ Alejandro shook his head then smoothed her blankets like Mother had done. ‘But you deserve it.’

Before the Wildes had moved in, Alejandro had long been there, haunting the addicts who’d lived in Number Thirty-six. The Sid-and-Nancy lovers were the most recent in a long line of people he’d decided to scare away from the same thing that had killed him. When Sid overdosed and Nancy ran screaming into the pitch-black woods, Alejandro had taken it as a sign and had hidden in the attic, curled up like a foetus in a dusty womb, waiting for sleep or rot to set in, for heaven or hell, for judgement.

For Isola.

For that was the purpose of his (after)life, he had decided later – to protect his sister-princess from all the dragons in the world. He had performed his

self-imposed duty admirably for over twelve years. Isola had hair and sand and sun and flowers.

But Alejandro couldn't protect her from the kingdom itself.

Next, there came Ruslana. She had been dragged around the globe by the anguish of women, strangers' emotions catching her lips like fish-hooks, bruising them forever black. And now she had slunk her way to the Wilde house under the cover of a particularly inky night. She had sensed the uneasiness about Mother, who was even then wearying of the daily trek across the battlefield raging in her mind.

Upon spying her at the window, Isola, ever-trusting to Alejandro's brotherly despair, had invited the strange woman to stay for Mother's bedtime instalment of *The Seventh Princess*. Ruslana, stunned at being noticed, had not come into the room, but instead listened invisibly from the windowsill as Mother had described the brothers six valiantly traversing harsh crags of land, swamps and jungles as they searched for their golden-haired treasure.

And what a strange woman she was. Ruslana was more solid than Alejandro, could be seen when she wanted, unlike the ghosts that drifted through the walls of most people's perceptions. Sometimes her great cloak, alive as the witching hour, would reach out and ensnare Isola, wrap her up in the pulsing black comfort, soothing her with a grazing touch of her shadows.

Ruslana would never tell Isola her age or origin. She shook her head and pressed her blackcurrant lips together when asked, and said she would stay, if only to hear the remainder of the story Mother recited. Twelve years later she would still be there. Ruslana was hooked from the word 'hero', she had later admitted to Isola, for she encountered them so rarely in the real world. Besides, Alejandro's mission to watch over Isola appealed to her naturally protective nature, and Ruslana became the second constant invisible in Isola's life.

One night, as Mother left and Ruslana drifted into reality to tuck her in, Isola voiced what had been playing on her mind for some time.

'Mothers and fathers take care of you,' she muttered sleepily, 'but brothers *protect* you.'

'Is that so?'

Isola liked the sound of Ruslana's low, calm voice, her perfect English but strange accent, a hybrid of cultures and peoples.

'Alejandro is my brother. That's why he's here. And so's Jamie.' A minute passed. She broke her own sleepy silence with a tentative request. 'Will you be my brother too, Ruslana?'

A militant chuckle. 'I'm a woman, Isola Wilde.'

'Does that mean you won't?'

Like Mother, like Alejandro, Ruslana smoothed the blankets that Isola's restless limbs were so intent on tangling. Ruslana leaned close, as though she wanted to kiss her cheek goodnight, but instead pursed her Morticia-black lips. Isola didn't know it then, but Ruslana seduced the men who killed women and kissed them with those very lips, cutting them open, revenging a death by taking a life.

'Nothing would give me greater honour, little princess.'

With twice the paranormal guardians, Isola seemed twice as strange. Father often thought his only daughter, his Wilde Child, was mad; the 'brothers' she constantly described might be split personalities. And how, he wondered, at four, five, six years old, did she know about opium dens? How could she identify spider breeds and edible flowers and the distant origins of seaweeds floating like dumped bodies in the sea?

These questions were always asked by Father, and always came out hewn into spear-shapes and hurled at Mother as accusations no matter what tone he tried to take, as though trying to sandpaper the points into a less painful shape. *It's got to be those stories you tell her. You're twisting her imagination with those bloody fairytales!*

On one of these occasions, Ruslana had felt the incessant pull deep in her belly – the heart of a girl in distress. It was only a mild pain compared to others she'd felt, but its proximity made it more forceful, and she felt it on both floors of the Wilde house.

Isola was standing at the top of the stairs in her pale pyjamas, her padded footsteps and watchful presence going unnoticed.

The shouts were moving upwards, like heat and smoke. The husband had found the hospital records of the wife's secret operation, and there would be no son now, not ever.

Wordlessly, Ruslana picked Isola up, cuddling the small sighing creature; her swirling cloak latched its tendrils around her limbs. The small girl was

bundled into the shadows, and she would never fear the dark.

❄

Of her eventual six collected brothers – the same number the Seventh Princess had – two were ghosts, one was a mermaid, one a faerie, one a Fury, and one a living boy. They came and went in her life, disappearing for weeks, sometimes for entire seasons, as was their nature.

Jealous, Isola had suspected they had secret sister-princesses elsewhere to protect, but they assured her that wasn't the case. They were also brothers to tombstones, they explained, to secret gardens, to murderers and gutters, to the sea – they had other places to haunt.

She knew it would be frighteningly easy for the princes to forget about her – after all, they didn't feel in quite the same way she did. Ghosts slowly strangled in their timeloops; childish faeries were too small to feel remorse for leaving; mermaids would go mad if they ignored the sea call; Ruslana was of the Furies, and so had girls to avenge every day for all of days, and who would never ever get her own chance to rest.

The princes didn't owe her anything. Their connection was of red string, not blood.

Maybe Isola had truly needed them when she was small. But now she was older, Isola didn't need them, she *wanted* them, and therein lay the difference. Did she deserve so large and warm a coterie? She was selfish, she knew; she fastened them to herself like charms on a bracelet, and froze her heart while in the company of other people, not allowing herself to get too attached. She had decided a long time ago that it was preferable to be frozen than exposed to the elements – even the pleasant ones.

The brother-princes loved her so ruthlessly, and Isola, like all children who were raised in the glow of it, did not question why. Privately, they wondered, not understanding themselves: What was it about Isola? What had she given them that her death wouldn't one day take away?

They had sought out the little fragile human girl themselves, seeking, in reality, a warm-blooded, air-breathing, still-living second chance. But there was something there now, something that had grown almost immediately.

She had two loving parents, but they'd sensed it, even then. Isola needed *them*. The Father was weak – he didn't have the capacity to handle either his daughter or his wife. And the Mother, she was worse – she ticked audibly, and they all knew it would only get louder and scarier as she ticked faster over time.

Since the moment they met her gaze, each of the princes had a responsibility, and even though Christobelle was as free as sea-froth, and Ruslana had her solemn duties, and Alejandro had already loved sisters of his own, and Grandpa Furlong grew closer to the crossing every day, and to Rosekin she was a carer and to James a friend-and-maybe-future-something-else, their stakes in her future were impossibly high.

Her happiness was theirs, and that made all the difference.

Doll House

'Invisible things are the only realities.'

– Edgar Allan Poe

Guinevere’s Rabbits

The sky was the burnt sepia of autumn; a paper-lantern moon hung aloft and the palette of the forest was bitten and bloody.

Edgar saw her often in the front yard of Number Thirty-six, her hair twisted up in *Sailor Moon*-style odango and pigtails. Sometimes she was reading or scuffing over anthills or doing both at once; her eyes on that large book while her clomping boots sent ant sergeants, brigadier generals and lowly soldiers rushing to man the sniper towers, the barracks and the trenches. Sometimes she was peeling open stillborn flowers, as though hunting for Thumbelinas.

There was something familiar but strange about her – Snow White with a suntan. Cinderella in biker boots. Tough and delicate and magical and real all at once.

One afternoon, there was a second person in her garden. Isola and a girl with blunt black hair were kneeling with their heads almost bumping together as they peered into the shrubbery.

They were wearing odd costumes: Isola had on a long blue dress and the other girl had a red paper crown perched atop her head. Edgar wondered briefly whether there was another costume party on, but before he considered wandering over to ask them Portia skipped right out the front door and crossed the street. She had become quite taken with the girl at Number Thirty-six, and Edgar hurried after her, embarrassed but slightly pleased.

‘Sola!’ Portia yelled.

Isola turned and lifted her gaze, squinting in the crisp sunlight. ‘Portia, look here,’ she said, seemingly unruffled by their sudden appearance. She held out her pale hands, which were clasped as though in prayer, then shifted her thumbs to make a peephole. Portia peered in.

‘Ew!’ Portia hopped up and down on the spot. ‘It’s an ugly *bug*!’

‘A grasshopper,’ corrected Isola, and dumped the creature in the small girl’s palm.

Portia squealed in pretend fright; her flushed cheeks gave away her excitement. ‘It’s moving! Cass!’ she shrieked, dashing suddenly across the street, her hands clasped tightly against any escape attempts. ‘Cassio! *It’s moving*!’

‘So you’re the new neighbour.’ The Asian girl rubbed her dirty palms on her bare legs, then offered her hand. ‘I’m Grape.’

‘I’m Edgar.’

‘I know.’ Grape grinned, showing all her teeth. There was a knowing sparkle behind her glasses, and Edgar suddenly remembered where he’d seen her before.

‘How’s the wrist?’ he asked innocently, and she cackled with laughter.

‘See, Sola? It *was* the highlight of the night,’ said Grape, to which Isola gave a pinched smile. ‘So –’ Grape turned back to Edgar ‘– how do you know Jella?’

‘She’s dating my best mate, Phillip.’

‘Oh my God, *Pip*? He’s a legend, he keeps trying to give me advice on picking up girls. It’s hilarious.’ She clapped her hands together. ‘You’re good at gardening, yeah?’

He shrugged. ‘My mum’s pregnant, she needs the help. Most things I plant die. I’ve got, like, an evil touch.’

‘The accursed black thumb,’ said Grape solemnly. ‘Well, that’s all right, because we’re trying to solve a rabbit infestation.’

As if on cue, a black lump bounded from the bushes, past them and towards the woodland. Edgar noticed that Isola watched it with a curious gaze.

‘I mean, yeah, it’s the cutest plague ever, but they’re destroying the veggie patch,’ Grape continued.

He could see their odd costumes better now, but they still didn’t make sense. They were both in school sports uniforms, but over hers, Isola wore a blue, ankle-length diaphanous nightgown, like the slightly moth-eaten dress of a Camelot drowning.

‘And you left the prince’s ball for this?’

Isola suddenly seemed aware of the odd see-through dress, and swished the sleeves awkwardly. ‘Autumn Athletics Carnival, actually. It’s a costume

for my house. I'm in Guinevere, the blue house,' she added unnecessarily.

'Are you any good?'

Grape laugh. 'Geez, no! They're terrible. They're our little stragglers, bless 'em.'

'Yeah, *they're* terrible. *I* don't compete,' said Isola, slightly defensively.

'The dress gives the illusion of house pride,' Grape told Edgar. She gestured rather smugly to the ribbons pinned to her chest. 'Arthur house. Red team. Undisputed conquerors.'

'Hey, I did compete in something,' said Isola, as if only just remembering. She lifted the hem of the dress to show Edgar the mud flung up her legs and flashed her shiny raw palms. 'Tug of war.'

'Sister K threatened her,' said Grape, quirking one eyebrow. '"'Maybe you'll find your house pride in detention, Miss Wilde!'" She mimicked a deep voice, then laughed an infectious spurt of giggles that seemed to vibrate through her whole body.

The three of them began ferreting through the shrubbery, combing the long grass with their fingers. The disturbed bushes rustled; more rabbits slipped out, followed by a gecko, which was scooped up by Grape's waiting hands and deposited on Portia's shoulder, who had returned to shriek happily at the wildlife.

Edgar reeled off his mother's usual tricks: wire fences, natural border-walls of nettles, kindly worded requests to the animals whether they'd please not eat certain plants, hot sauce mixed with water to spray over the garden. The last option sounded the most straightforward, and in the more unkempt shrubs they uncovered a crop of old butterfly cocoons, the husks of mummified houseflies, old spider-snacks. When they were certain the wildlife had been cleared, they gathered spray bottles and mixed water and hot sauce, spraying their brew over the plant stems and leaves, a fine red mist like diluted blood. The rabbits might still come, of course, but one taste of this and they wouldn't be back in a hurry.

When Isola took Portia around the corner of the house to find the best spot to release the little gecko back into the wild, Grape sat back on her heels and said abruptly to Edgar, 'So – what are your intentions, punk?'

'Huh?'

She pitched her voice roughly, eyebrows drawn together in an impression of someone unknown. 'Are you gonna marry my daughter, Mr Edgar?'

‘Uh, what? I –’

Grape snapped her fingers, the serious expression vanishing. ‘Sorry! I’m just trying to prep you for Mr Wilde’s inevitable speech. He only ever plays “bad cop”, so don’t take it personally.’

‘Oh,’ said Edgar, feeling his cheeks heat up.

‘Of course, my question still stands.’ She gave that same raucous laugh at his embarrassment. ‘Hey, don’t look so worried! I’m just looking out for my best friend! I love her to a million stinkin’ bits, I swear. It hasn’t been easy, though, not since . . .’ She jerked her head meaningfully towards the upper floor of the Wilde house. Edgar craned his neck to see the latticed windows, the firmly closed curtains. ‘That’s not to say I’ve been the easiest friend, either. And she’s always stuck by me. When the girls at school found me out.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean it’s hard enough being “the foreign girl”,’ she said, with a smile that crinkled up her whole face and suddenly wet eyes, ‘without being “the only gay kid in school” too.’

Friendship: An Interlude

Years ago, when they were small, Grape remembered Mrs Wilde walking her and Isola down High Street, towards the bus that would take them all to Bloodpearl Beach for the day. As they waited at the road crossing for the lights to change, Mrs Wilde took her daughter’s hand and nodded at Grape, to whom Isola held out her hand and intoned, ‘Hold my hand so we don’t float away!’

Looking back, Grape realised that it was a simple trick to train them in road safety, that the asphalt wasn’t really anti-gravity like Mrs Wilde claimed, and small girls couldn’t anchor each other to the ground no matter how tightly they grasped. Years passed and Grape grew out of the habit, even if she sometimes felt, as her feet left the pavement, the phantom swoop in her belly she imagined weightlessness to feel like.

When they were thirteen, Isola ripped a crucifix off the wall and threw it ninja-star-style at Bridget McKayde, after Bridget had hissed *dyke* when

Grape passed by, when Grape's barely there sexuality was suddenly her defining characteristic in those oppressive halls.

Isola had been her best friend for five years already; the past three had been a tearful miasma, as the Wilde family imploded behind the screen of trees and Isola stopped being so clever and funny and loud, became mute and shadowy like a stitch-lipped flower shuttered indoors, where it could neither grow nor die, in stasis. She stopped meeting people's gazes, stopped wanting to be touched; she withheld hugs and ceased braiding little worms with ribbon through Grape's hair as she sat behind her during class.

But that was the moment, while Bridget howled and grasped her black eye, Grape knew she would always *always* **always** love Isola Wilde, and vowed to do better to show it.

They shared the tiniest of smiles before Sister K hauled Isola roughly from the room. Grape waited after school outside the headmistress's office, listening to the muted shouting like an underwater ruckus. Grape picked at the rips in the cracked vinyl chair, her eyes fixed on a portrait of Dymphna over the coffee table, remembering that every saintess was once just a gawky and heavy-hipped girl with oily skin and uncertainty of self like the rest of them. Grape watched the portrait for a wink, a shadow of a grin – an acknowledgement of the saintless girls of the future.

But Dymphna ignored her, and on the quiet walk up High Street a half-hour later, under the neon sign of the Church of the Unlocked Heart, Grape reached out to grasp Isola's hand, briefly and wordlessly, looking both ways as they crossed the road.

She felt Isola squeeze back.

Names Exchanged

The next week Isola was sitting at the end of the driveway, her wavy mass of anime heroine hair uncombed, eyes fixed in a book.

Edgar shouldered his skateboard out into the court, greeted her, then proceeded to skate up and down the asphalt as damp oak leaves caught in the wheels and stuck to his jeans. He almost tripped on a hidden tree branch. *Be cool, Edgar*, he told himself, as he regained his balance and waited for Isola Wilde to talk to him.

After skating and waiting a solid fifteen minutes, he kicked his board under his elbow and marched over to her. She didn't even look up as his shadow stained her hair.

'Hey, Isola? Can I ask you something?'

She squinted up at him. 'Yeah?'

'Why do you live out here? On the edge of the spooky woods and all?'

A tiny smile cracked her still-life lips. 'We used to live right in the middle of 'em, but the council made us move. Gingerbread cottages apparently don't make for sustainable living.'

'Ah –' Edgar tapped his nose knowingly '– so you're a witch.'

'That's what they tell me.'

Edgar laughed, but she didn't.

He shifted his skateboard so she could see it clearly under the bulk of his arm. It was bright pink, an exact replica of the hoverboard from *Back to the Future Part II*. Red scars pocked his elbows from all the spectacular crashes he'd had on it.

'Where did you move from?' Isola asked, squinting up through the sunlight at him.

He sat down beside her, blocking the blinding light, and pointed to the far hills rising. 'Other side of the valley. It's only a twenty-minute drive. I didn't even have to change schools.'

‘Why’d you move?’

‘My mum’s an old hippie. Her name’s actually listed as “Lotus Blossom” on her birth certificate.’

Isola’s narrow lips curved upward. ‘And?’

‘And they were building a transmitter tower over our house. Mum was convinced our brains would fry in our sleep. She legitimately considered making tinfoil hats.’

‘And she moved you here for health and safety?’ She chuckled at some invisible irony.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ She tossed her book into the grass and looked up at him, a curious glint in her eye. ‘What’s your real name?’

Edgar raised a mocking eyebrow and said loftily, ‘Honestly, I’m famous. I thought you’d claimed to have read all my work?’ He started picking the shredded leaves from his skateboard’s axle. ‘It’s Edgar Llewellyn. Not nearly as original as Isola Wilde.’

‘It’s not original at all. Mum named me after Oscar Wilde’s sister.’

‘No kidding. Was she a writer, too? What’d she do?’

‘Nothing,’ she said, looking put out. ‘At least, as far as I’m aware. She died really young.’

‘All the best people do,’ he conceded.

Then came rumbling in the distance; a monster waking up. The treetops shook with trepidation.

‘Is that a *car*?’ said Edgar in disbelief, before adding, ‘Is it weird that I’ve lived here a month and already I’m sensitive to the sounds of civilisation?’ He craned his neck as the car came into view and rolled along the dirt road that wound around the woods. Rusted red metal glinted through the hazy dust clouds. Two surfboards clogged the roof rack.

‘Aha,’ said Isola, her voice coloured with a hidden smile.

The ancient car looped around the court and came to a rolling halt in front of Number Thirty-six. A boy with sickly too-much-time-indoors skin and still-wet-from-the-shower hair climbed out of the driver’s seat.

‘Jamie Sommerwell!’ called Isola. ‘What brings you to these backwoods?’

The boy drummed the car roof nervously. ‘C’mon, Isola.’ He climbed back into the car, crawled across and kicked open the passenger door. ‘The

surf's supposed to be decent today.' He patted the cracked leather seat.

'You know, I charge by the hour.'

'In what, Monopoly money?'

Isola rolled her eyes so dramatically they might have rolled out like blue marbles down the asphalt. She waved a hand towards the car. 'Edgar, this is James. He's not usually such a creep.'

The boy in the car gave a sharp jerk of his head in Edgar's direction. He looked back to Isola, and said, 'Chariot's departing, Sola.'

'Hold on.' She got up, dusted gravel off her skirt and hurried indoors.

James and Edgar looked at one another.

'Nice car,' said Edgar.

'Nice joke,' said James coldly. 'It's a piece of shit, I'm well aware.'

They sat in awkward silence. Edgar blinked at his warped reflection in a dent on the bonnet. James fiddled with some controls on the dashboard until The Smiths filtered out of the speakers and drifted amongst the shrubbery of Aurora Court, netting in webs, crowding letterboxes.

Isola came marching out. Gripping the car's barely attached passenger door, she looked inquiringly at Edgar. 'You swim?'

'About as well as Jeff Buckley.'

A husky laugh battered her throat, a trapped butterfly. 'Well, we're going to the beach. Care to join?'

She plopped a large straw-woven bag on the car floor. Edgar spotted a swimsuit, a towel, a heavily dog-eared book. He shook his head.

'Sure? You're welcome to, honestly.'

'Nah. I gotta go plant some more trees for Mum.'

'Well, okay. Try not to decapitate any more rabbits.'

Edgar skated back to his house. When he reached the letterbox, which still bent double as though spewing out letters, the car's brakes screeched behind him.

Isola was working furiously to wind the window down. It stuck fast, and she yelled through the brief gap, 'Hey, Edgar?'

'Yeah?'

'Nice skateboard!' She winked, and James hit the accelerator.

To the Waters and the Wilde

Isola's life when she was with James moved in chunks. The days souped into nights, and time seemed different, pliable somehow, like something spongy she could squeeze in her fist.

James's ancient car – race-car-red originally, the fastest colour ever – was called Pepito and had a moustache painted on the bonnet. James drove Isola to the coast with wind whistling through the unstuck lining of the passenger door and The Smiths, Isola's favourite band, on the radio. James always played their music when she was around.

Isola angled the rearview mirror towards her. As she had expected, her eldest brother sat in the back, his arms folded over his impeccable attire, staring out the window over the winding cliffs. Alejandro usually tagged along in cars with her but never lingered at the destination; he didn't trust cars in the slightest, having a life-long attachment to horse-drawn coaches. She smiled and wished – not for the first time – that James could know him.

James scowled as he re-angled the mirror, but allowed Isola to put her feet up on the dash; she scratched her toenails luxuriously over the front compartment.

Isola smiled across at him, remembering how similar he'd looked when they'd first met. He had a wrinkled face even then, at the tender age of almost-five, with an air of being bothered and the constant smell of biscuits about him as he clutched a different *Star Wars* toy every day.

They were in the playground at their kindergarden. Under the not-so-watchful eye of a bored-looking twenty-something, who was reading shoddy celebrity tabloids and rolling her eyes at the babbling antics of the children, Isola had climbed the highest tree, misjudged the strength of the topmost bough and come tumbling down.

Isola had a vague memory of scrunching up her eyes against a dizziness, feeling the tilting world beneath her, hearing the grind of gears in the earth,

the faint whispering pain of the tree branch she'd brought down.

And hovering over her was James – little Jamie then – with her hand clutched in his sweaty grip, brown eyes peering anxiously down at her. She blinked groggily in the green-dappled shade, feeling the involuntary tears of shock dripping down her cheeks. His seemingly permanently scowl softened, just a little, and only in a way that she would ever recognise upon his face.

Barely a week after that Isola gave James chickenpox, and James let her hold one of his *Star Wars* figurines; they shared their sniffles and sandwiches, and couldn't be pried apart.

But now…

They hadn't spoken for a few weeks, not since she'd stormed out of his house. James wasn't one to give chase, and Isola always forgot to stay angry at people. The car was somewhat cleaner – perhaps he'd finally washed it, and found her dusty apology scrawled on the window. Isola knew this tune, the musical theme of their relationship – ignore it, start again, pretend nothing had come between them.

It was too cold for swimming at Bloodpearl Beach, but adventurous dark heads on surfboards bobbed in the green-grey ocean, their wetsuits like seal skins. Alejandro drifted out of the car and whispered a foreign goodbye while James was waxing down the boards.

Froth crested the waves, cream on cold coffee. Rips snarled visibly along the sandbanks, sucking occasional swimmers out to sea. Lifeguards made repeated trips into the wave break. The sand was harsh with cracked seashells, cuttlefish bones. Seaweed festered on the northern end of the beach, shark eggs and starfish rotting amidst the bulbs.

They'd spent most of last year's summer here, eating lemon-soggy fish and chips, watching late-evening thunderstorms roll over the mastheads of yachts. Isola's hair had grown stiff with seasalt and she'd barely brushed it for months. Injury-prone Grape had stepped on coral, cutting open her foot, and had hobbled around on crutches for a week. They'd sat around a blue bonfire with local stoners and philosophy graduates, arguing about moon-landing conspiracy theories and whether there was any real reason they shouldn't start a Fight Club. There had been dolphin spottings and surfing competitions and Grape was stung by a jellyfish on two separate occasions.

The summer that had just passed them by had been depressing in comparison. Toxic red algae had bloomed over the reef and a number of dolphins had beached themselves. Grape had been forced into hours of tutoring, her parents determined she raise her grades, and James had seemed colder, too. Isola was unsure what she might have done, until he had tried to kiss her and she had pulled away and knew that he was turning something unrequited into something akin to hate – the Devil's alchemy – and now, instead of a memory to fondly wave back at, the summer before was a time to grab for in panic.

James was a great surfer. His board had a crooked fin and jagged marks on the nose that he claimed was proof of a deadly past encounter with sharks. Isola was pretty sure he'd had a spectacular wipe-out on the rocks that he didn't want to admit to.

She, on the other hand, was not very good. Mostly she paddled around the wave break, lying on her belly on his old board as she caught the smaller waves back to shore. Without a wetsuit, her cold skin grew waxy. Her fingertips bubbled.

This was where she liked to be best.

She threw her board on the shore, paddled back out and floated, belly-up and eyes closed, devolving back to the ice statue, then the iceberg. Her ear canals flooded with salt and brine, suspending her brain in foreign fluid, and if she listened hard enough she heard the screams and panicked splashes of *S. S. Titanic* escapees; frenzies preserved forever in bubbles, like leaf fossils in rock.

Isola had missed the water. Alejandro had locked her bedroom window to ward off another visit from the dead girl, and Isola longed for the smell of oncoming rain spells, the wet rustle of fallen leaves sticking like gum to the sides of the house.

The dead girl hadn't appeared again. The window stayed locked.

Isola closed her eyes and a surprise wave tumbled her. She surfaced with a cough, eyes stinging with saltwater. Whale-song vibrations travelled up her skull and static-leaped to the tips of her hair. She thought of giant squids, never seen alive, and mermaids, never seen dead. She thought of Christobelle, a tempest given shape. Isola had met her at this same beach.

❄

Isola, six years old. Father, picking grains of sand from the cracked spine of his crime-thriller novel. Mother, knee-deep in the green, gently coaxing Isola into the ocean.

Isola remembered the salt glinting on the fine golden hairs of Mother's arms, the imprint of bikini straps sunburned on her shoulders. She remembered the head rising from the water's depths as the Wildes explored the rock pools at low tide. A tangle of psycho-red seaweed. Isola leaned closer – it wasn't seaweed but hair. The single eye beneath the coarse swirls fixed on her.

'Hello, sea child,' murmured Christobelle, bubbles popping on her tongue, saltwater trickling from her mouth.

Isola wasn't a naturally strong swimmer like Grape or a good surfer like James, but Christobelle had taught her how to linger at the bottom, collecting clams, stalking fish schools as the watery sun passed overhead. When Christobelle held her hand Isola could stay under as long as she liked – air bubbles seemed to pulse from the mermaid's perpetually cold skin, keeping Isola's lungs from going tight. Underwater, Christobelle's thick hair seemed sentient – in fact, Isola was certain it lived, the way it twisted, curled around shells on the sea floor and lifted them to the mermaid's eyes, even tapped Isola's shoulder when Christobelle wanted her attention.

Isola kicked her legs to mimic her tail, and she wished her skin would glitter with golden scales too, and that one day she'd have hair to use as a weapon, and perfect breasts like Christobelle's she could pour into seashell bras.

When Christobelle joined the ranks of the brother -princes, Isola was surprised to learn she and Ruslana were already acquainted.

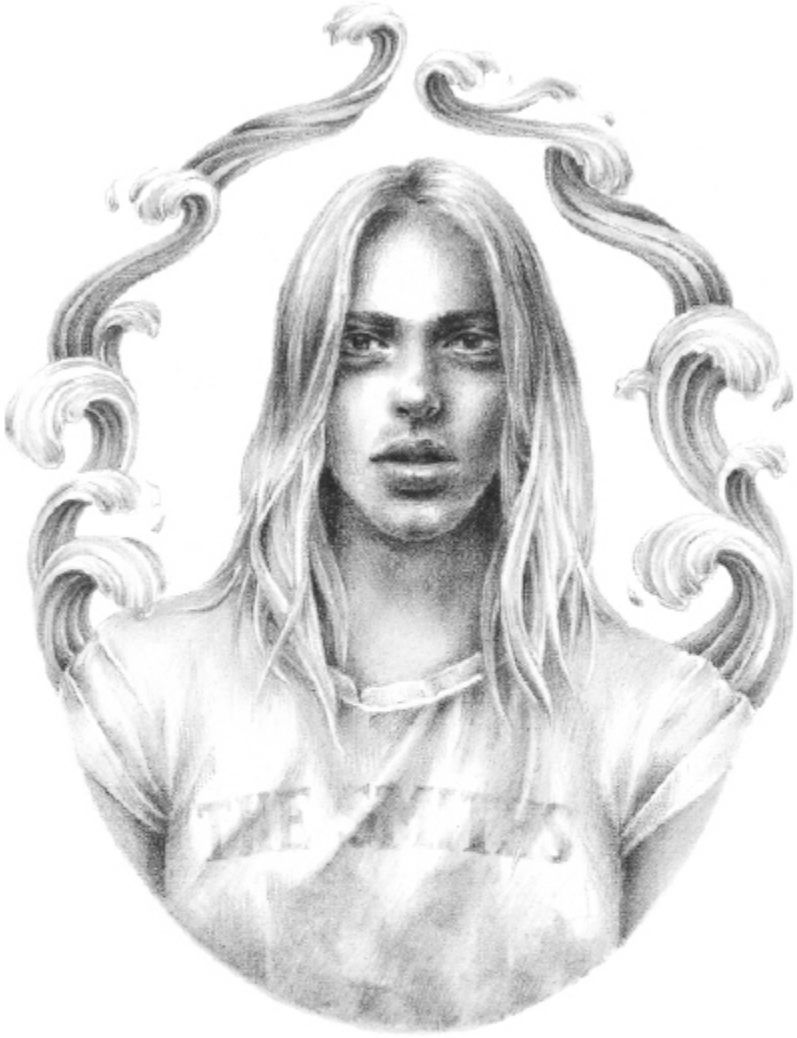
'Oh, it was a lifetime ago,' Christobelle had sighed in the evening bath they'd shared. Isola had sat with her knees drawn up to her chest; the mermaid had taken up most of the space and her scales had been quite cold to the touch under the bubbles. 'Well, Ruslana had come to investigate the disappearance of a handsome young sailor. She can tell when a woman's involved in these sorts of things. Fantastic detective, she is. You know the first thing she said when she found me in that cave?'

‘What?’

Christobelle had shown her pearly teeth. ‘Couldn’t have finished him better myself.’

❄

On the ride home with James, the back seat was empty. Isola propped her legs up on the dash, her still-damp skin glimmering in the glass-focused blaze of the setting sun. Morrissey mourned through second-hand speakers as they cannoned into the sunset like daredevils.



James

Forever the Girl – Advice from Saint Pip

Edgar's best mate, Pip Sutcliffe, had excitable eyes high on his face like glassy periscopes. He wore slouchy knitted caps and hoodies and looked like the boy the bored security guard would indiscreetly follow around the store. In truth, he was a veritable fountain of nonsensical knowledge, passing out nuggets of information he'd gleaned from a lifetime of nosiness. Friends called him Saint Pip the Guru. He talked an awful lot of crap but if one looked hard enough there were rice-chunks of good sense, diamonds stuck in that steaming pile.

'Pip,' called Edgar, 'I need your advice.'

Edgar was sprawled on nineteen-year-old Pip's couch in his flat in downtown Avalon. The olive-green sofa had been taken from rubbish left on a stranger's nature strip. It hardly had any springs and smelled as though it had been involved in something illegal. 'A bargain,' Saint Pip had labelled it.

'Lucky for you, mate, the doctor is *in*.' Pip was peeling vegetables over the sink in the adjoining kitchen. The apprentice chef wandered out, threw a carrot and peeler at Edgar, and joined him on the couch as he hacked away at a carrot for the stir-fry. 'Now, what's – Majella, babe, turn it down a decibel.'

Majella Lavery, more commonly known as Jella, was a gorgeous black Welsh girl with a vivid smile. She was Pip's easy-going girlfriend, and the amicable hostess of the Big Party that had kicked off the school year, which was held secretly in her parents' house while they were holidaying in Barbados. The next morning she'd found broken beer bottles in the bathtub, a pair of naked strangers in her parents' en suite, and a floating cloud of vomit in the pool.

'Damage bill was, like, three hundred pounds,' Jella had said cheerfully at the time. '*Wicked* party, though.'

Right now she was sunk in a mostly crushed beanbag (cheap on eBay, pick-up only, no refunds), playing a violent video game across the room. ‘You can’t tell me what to do,’ she responded heatedly. ‘Crush the patriarchy!’ Jella turned the volume on her game up; they could hear the violent screeching of zombies, the squeal of a chainsaw.

Pip shrugged, then asked loudly in Edgar’s ear, ‘What’s the problem?’

‘Well, there’s this girl –’

‘There’s always a girl, Eddie,’ said Pip, switching straight to guru-mode. ‘And there’ll always *be* the girl, you know? From Eve in the Garden to the Whore of Babylon. You know?’

‘The *what* of what?’

‘Never read the Revelations bit in the Bible?’ His huge eyes went even wider. ‘Hardcore stuff, man. She’s this chick who rides a dragon. I thought you’d have heard of it for sure. She sounds like she’s come straight out of your drawings.’ He waved his hand regally. ‘Continue, son.’

‘Well, there’s this girl, and I do fancy her a bit,’ Edgar admitted. ‘She’s –’

‘Pretty?’

‘Beautiful. And mysterious – she’s literally the only other person I’ve seen living on that street.’

Pip shifted in his beanbag. His periscope eyes zoomed in. ‘A mysterious chick who lives in the woods? Sounds hot.’

‘Sounds *what*?’ Jella called, looking around distractedly.

‘I mean, sounds not,’ Pip self-corrected. ‘Undead alert, Jella.’

Too late. Gore splattered the screen, and she sighed as she found herself on the restart menu. She dropped her controller and twisted in the beanbag.

‘So, sweeatpea –’ Jella called everyone dribbly baby names like ‘honeypie’ and ‘sugarplum’, as though she was some middle-aged waitress snapping bubblegum behind her teeth ‘– who’s the lucky girl? Or should I say, from the sounds of her, the lucky woodland sprite?’

Edgar swung his legs off the couch and sat up. ‘Actually, she was at your party. Isola Wilde?’

‘Oh! Yeah, she’s best friends with a girl I know, Grape. She’s nice but pretty quiet. Everyone says she’s a bit strange. Grape won’t say a word against her but she’s from a weird family, apparently. In fact, everyone seems to know *of* her, but no-one seems to actually *know* her. Probably doesn’t even have Facebook,’ she added dramatically.

‘What you’ve got to do, right, is collect pebbles,’ said Pip seriously, ‘and make a really impressive nest –’

‘That’s penguins, Pip,’ interrupted Jella.

‘Right, well, then – just ask her out!’

‘Out where?’ sighed Edgar. ‘There’s nowhere to go in Avalon.’

Pip shrugged. ‘Just ask her over, then. Spend time with her, it doesn’t matter where.’

Edgar toed the scraggly fringe of the rug, which was also nicked from the side of a lonely road.

‘C’mon, Eddie! Just be you. That way, if she doesn’t like you back, you’ll know for sure it’s either your looks or personality that drove her away!’

Edgar threw a tea-stained cushion at Pip. ‘So much for the saintly guru.’

Arm cocked to launch the pillow back, Pip paused, sniffing at the air. ‘I smell burning,’ he announced.

The Moon Melodies

At first, when Isola stirred awake to the gentle, garbled singing, she thought Mother had the radio on in the bathroom – it wasn't unheard of, even at 3 am. She shuffled out of bed, wary of leaving Mother alone with water and electricity, and found the bathroom dark, the tub stark dry.

She could still hear singing. A girl's voice.

'Christobelle?' she whispered. Like all mermaids, Christobelle fancied herself something of a siren, and had taught Isola a number of old merfolk-songs.

'Isola,' answered a voice that wasn't Christobelle's. 'Here.'

She followed the voice back to her room. The third prince Ruslana, a slinky silhouette at the window, motioned her over.

The ghost girl whose body Isola had found in the woods, lank-haired and dirty-clothed, was standing on the lawn and singing wolf-like up at the moon in nonsense-lyrics. Her voice was perhaps pretty once, but now it just sounded broken, hoarse. Occasionally she raised her hand to wipe a fresh trickle of blood from her chin.

Isola felt nothing but pity.

'Poor girl,' she muttered, wishing she could help her. She looked at Ruslana. 'You're a Fury, you're meant to investigate these things. Can't you find out what she wants with me?

Ruslana shook her head, Cleopatra-eyes still fixed on the girl. 'Not if she doesn't want me to.'

Fatherhood: An Interlude

Father Wilde poured a drink of amber brandy, sloshed it round the glass. He had to get up in two hours anyway; he wondered whether it was worth

going back to bed. Maybe he should check on his daughter. He could hear her, walking around upstairs.

He sighed, placing the emptied glass on the kitchen table. If he went upstairs and asked what was bothering her, he doubted his daughter would tell. Isola had always been a talkative kid, confident in her vocabulary, with a clear speaking voice good for public speeches in halls without microphones. After her birthday, after all that stuff with her mother had come to a head, she'd retreated up those stairs and sometimes he thought that she'd never come down, that Isola was up with his wife where he couldn't reach them, that her voice couldn't cross the void in this damned house, its two separate storeys like echelons of the underworld and afterlife.

And here he was, trapped in limbo with the dead philosophers and all the unbaptised babies, like his mother-in-law said Isola would be if they didn't take her to church in the first place.

Father Wilde poured another drink.

Why had he expected Isola to remain the same, he wondered? Maybe it was simple puberty, her quiet, her coldness, her strange sleeping hours. He spent her tenth year clearing his throat in the doorway, leaving glasses of milk and sloppily buttered sandwiches. He wasn't used to this, to being the one who climbed the stairs when she was teary or sleepless or gripped in the golden claws of a king-sized tantrum. She had only taken to her room in her pre-teens – which had never been her sanctuary, not when she had a gloaming woods in her constant periphery – and he had called the doctor for her then, and taken his wife's book from her.

Then a change so drastic and yet he couldn't put his finger on it. Isola, aged eleven, came down the stairs, pale but lovely, sadder than she should have known at her age. He tried to fatten her up, but the weight went to the birds. She was her, but not quite her – she now possessed the strangest calm, stolen from the girls in that damn storybook.

Maybe it was this house, which breathed deeply but only at night, and so he had made solid plans to move them away that year. He had expected her to cry, of course, but not to rage; she had held her breath and turned purple, and swore she'd never forgive him if he took them away from the woods.

His old Isola would have cried. Now her papery backbone had stiffened, almost become frozen. Eventually the real estate agents had taken the sign from the lawn, and they continued on as the Wildes at Number Thirty-six,

in this horrible house, with its faulty wiring and flickering lights, water stains on the ceilings from the bathroom upstairs, as the trees closed in around them.

Starring Edgar Llewellyn as Himself

One: Spend time with her.
Two: Just be you.

That was the advice dispensed by Saint Pip after barely any consideration, but Edgar took it as gospel all the same.

Every time Edgar went to collect the rare bundles of mail, there she was, picking at her torn stockings, shuffling through bills and discarding junkmail, arranging the letters alphabetically. He put out the bins as Isola cooed at the cat, trying to coax it indoors. They would both smile and flush slightly, and the street between them seemed narrower every day.

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Isola leaned back against the front door and smiled into the hall. She was growing quite fond of the family at Number Thirty-seven. There was the hippy mother, the husband, a suit-and-tie-and-sorry-got-caught-in-traffic kind of man. The bratty brother who Isola often spied hiding in the yard with a gadget in hand, waiting for his sister to emerge from the house so he could direct his remote-controlled helicopter to mercilessly swoop her; the sister who shrieked for Edgar's attention, to watch her bounce on the trampoline, watch me skip the jump rope ten times in a row, watch me hit Cassio with this tree branch, watch me tie a bonnet on Isola's cat, it's not animal cruelty I swear.

Then Edgar. Slouchy, kind Edgar. The bright teeth that blunted his mumbles. His silver braces rhyming with Isola's golden necklace. Tall and bulky, black wavy hair always in his eyes. Meaty hands, hairs standing to attention on his arms.

He had the broad chest and shoulders of a woodsman, she noted. Well used to cutting girls out of wolf bellies.

Mother Wilde was sitting up in bed, a book open on her lap. She clearly wasn't reading it, but the action alone was enough to double the smile on Isola's face.

'What're you so flushed about?' Mother inquired.

'Nothing, Mum.'

'Hmm. I don't buy it.' Mother seemed slightly put off. 'It's that boy across the street, isn't it?' She smiled and her eyes were brighter than they'd seemed in months. But there was something else in her face, a strange tightness about her features as though her smile had lit a candle and the wax was melting down.

Isola on the Outer

As November drained into December, the first strangled sparrow appeared in the frosty garden. Its little head was twisted right around; a demonic possession. At first, Isola blamed Morris, the family cat, who sometimes left distasteful but well-intended gifts of chewed mice and frogs for her. Then she saw the crescent mark on its noodling throat. A tiny moon bruise. As if the person who'd throttled it had done so with a lunar-charm bracelet.

Isola coddled the limp creature into a tissue-lined shoebox and buried it under the plum tree while Morris sniffed around the shallow grave.

That night, Alejandro and Ruslana both came to stand at the window, and they listened to the ghost girl's strange, lyricless tunes sung much louder than the previous time. Her appearances seemed random, arbitary. They still weren't sure what she wanted. Sympathy? Vengeance? Or just an audience for her lilting, choked vocals?

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The next night, the midnight music was welcome for a change; the exotic strumming conjured images of musty blues bars, chapped fingertips. Isola heard the strains beginning as she readied herself for bed, and had to stop herself from squealing with joy as she climbed out of her bedroom window and perched on the roof, waiting for the sixth prince's song to end before she spoke.

GRANDPA FURLONG: The sixth prince. An elderly ghost and faithful friend to the eight-legged.

He sat with his legs dangling carelessly over the edge in his dusk-coloured overcoat, felt-brimmed hat tugged low over his brow.

Grandpa Furlong was an elderly black gentleman who had died of lung cancer – starched hospital bedsheets, a chest oozing tar – and his pipe, his mandolin and his hacking cough had followed him into death. He'd been a university lecturer and knew all there was to know about spiders. He could identify them by their web patterns and knew how quickly the blood of the bitten would curdle. The abundance of spiders was what had initially drawn Grandpa Furlong to Vivien's Wood, where Isola had found him strumming in tune to the weaving of webs.

The music stopped as his fingers lifted from the rumbling strings.

'Hi, Grandpa!'

'Blue Eyes. It's been a while.' Grandpa Furlong grinned, showing smoke-stained canines. 'I heard about your uninvited guest from the gossipy little thing in your garden. The, ah, pink –'

'Rosekin.'

'Ah, yes. Rosie told me, in that dramatic way a' hers,' said Grandpa Furlong, his wrinkled hands fumbling in his overcoat for his old-fashioned pipe. 'And I'm gonna spend a few nights watchin' over you, my li'l lady.'

The pipe had always been a source of fascination to Isola. When he lit it with the single match he'd been buried with – the match head never broke black – the pipe wafted plumes of psychedelic colour, the exhales of a hookah-smoking caterpillar. It smelled differently every time it was lit, too, and was never as coarse as real tobacco.

Tonight, the smoke was desert-orange, and it smelled like vanilla and sandalwood and grass and chalk, as though dead scents were wafting randomly from the other side. A window to eternity accidentally left cracked.

'Why, hello, darlin',' he cooed, cupping a little mass of fuzzy black in his palm. Isola saw the glitter of black eyes, the thin strokes of leg. It was Grandpa Furlong's favourite spider.

'Hi, Dame Furlong,' said Isola to the spider. She lived in the potted rosebush at the front door, and waited ever-patiently for Grandpa's appearances.

His mouth puckered up in a wizened grin. He stroked Dame Furlong's back, and after a minute the spider climbed up Grandpa's arm and made herself cosy on his warm pipe.

There was a clattering behind them; Alejandro was walking over the roof tiles. ‘The upstairs windows are all locked and sealed. She cannot get in again without your express permission.’ He sat down. ‘Hello, Mr Furlong.’

‘Hello, my young friend,’ said Grandpa Furlong graciously. He offered Alejandro a toke on his pipe and, as always, the first prince shook his head, saying, ‘My apologies. I have abandoned the habit.’

The ghosts watched the polished stars, and Isola watched the curtained windows of Number Thirty-seven. The woods loomed dense and black. One of Aurora Court’s twin streetlights fuzzed in and out of consciousness.

‘Do you think she’s a split?’ Isola asked suddenly, wondering why no-one had suggested it before.

They called them ‘splits’ or sometimes ‘echoes’: half-hearted hauntings, the kind her brothers had always warned her about. They were people who had died with their minds half-made up, who were unpredictable, confused, often caught in loops. Splits were unable to change, unable to move on; they infected their surroundings with their feelings – emotions so strong they anchored them to the earth.

Grandpa Furlong was the most knowledgeable of her brothers despite his limited education. He was worldly, but not yet weary.

‘I don’t know,’ mused Grandpa Furlong. ‘She’s actin’ out some life events sure, by th’ sounds of it. But I’m told she’s quite conscious of where she is – and of who *you* are, Blue Eyes.’

‘She has only died recently,’ added Alejandro. ‘Perhaps she is still coming to terms with it.’

‘Then why come back as a ghost at all?’ queried Isola.

She could smell the salty rain contracting in the bellies of the overhead clouds carried in from the fathering ocean. The cold tiles bit into her legs. She shivered.

‘Don’t be frightened, now,’ said Grandpa Furlong. Careful not to dislodge Dame Furlong, he inhaled deeply from his pipe, pursed his lips and shot wedding rings of smoke towards the Poe house. The bright orange smoke was changing colour, slowly turning toxic-yellow. ‘I’ll be here as long as you need me, Blue Eyes. She’s jus’ a girl, and a dead one, at that. You needn’t be scared o’ her.’

‘Don’t forget,’ said Isola seriously, ‘she’s half-witch.’

‘And half-princess,’ said Alejandro thoughtfully. ‘Gracious, *querida*. We may have met your match.’

❄

Grandpa was very interested in the things the dead girl had said to Isola. Particularly her mentioning of the racket Isola’s pumping blood had made. Some ghosts resented the living for so easily possessing what they no longer had, he mused. A beating heart. Hot, sticky blood. A chance to change.

Grandpa Furlong’s nightwatch seemed to be doing the trick. Weeks passed without sightings of the dead girl and only occasional snatches of singing, like it had drifted up from deep underwater. Isola felt safe while Grandpa Furlong strummed hymns on the roof, serenading the moon, gradually encouraging Her to reveal a little more – a sliver of white light here, a crater or two the next night.

The hypnotic strings drew more faeries than ever to Number Thirty-six, resulting in midnight garden parties of a sort. Rosekin, who usually slept in the music box on Isola’s bookshelf, sat and leaned against the cold window. Her cousin Winsor was sometimes allowed to join her, and the little night-lights pulsed dreamy pink and emerald-green to the chords as more rainbow orbs drifted past. That arrangement didn’t last long, as Winsor simply could not behave herself. It was only her third night when she found a ladybug traversing the book spines, and proceeded to pull its legs off.

‘Out! You – you feral Tinkerbell!’ Isola huffed, shooing Winsor back through the crack in the walls.

‘He don’t even play good, anyway!’ Winsor stuck out her green tongue and hurled the insect’s corpse on the bed as a parting gift.

Each night Isola stayed up as late as she could, reading her book of fairytales under drooping eyelids, trying to exhaust herself. She’d been having a repeated dream of standing before a mystery door. She’d breathed out and it’d swung open, having accepted the secret password of her presence, her warm exhale. Something bright had blinded her, and she’d woken up throttled by midnight’s sticky fingers, sickly sweet night-breath having tangled in her lungs.

Waking abruptly from this same dream for the third time in a fortnight, Isola held her breath until, through the thumping blood in her ears, she discerned a mandolin note from the roof.

She peeked into the master bedroom. Mother lay on her side, the curving mountain range of her body rising and falling with tiny earthquakes. Isola counted another night Mother hadn’t died in her sleep.

The Mermaid's Tale

Goggle-eyed, her hair stuck under a cap, Grape surfaced at the end of the lane.

'How'd I do?'

'Pretty good,' replied Isola, flashing the waterproofed face of the stopwatch.

Grape's expression darkened slightly, and she swore under her breath.

'Pretty good' was never 'good enough'. Grape had a competitive streak thick as an extra bone running through her body. She listened to bold Mozart symphonies while working out at the gym and swam competitively year round at the Avalon Aquatic Centre, where Isola offered to time her laps.

Grape lifted her goggles; her skin was puckered underneath and water dribbled out the lenses. 'Sure you're not getting bored?'

Isola shook her head. She had her favourite book and a head full of dark thoughts to keep her company. She didn't like swimming in the pool herself – they felt like oceans for prisoners and the chlorine tinged her hair green.

'C'mon, Mieko,' she ordered, using Grape's Japanese given-name. 'One lap, right now!'

'But –'

Isola clicked the stopwatch and Grape kicked away, too competitive to let the challenge slide.

In Grape's place, a mass of red hair bloomed rose-like, and the mermaid smiled up at Isola.

'So,' said Christobelle, hauling herself up to sit by the diving block, 'what's happening with the boy?'

'James?' said Isola, crouching beside her. 'I don't know, he's still being –'

'No, no, not him!' She splashed her tail, her golden scales glimmering.

'Then what boy?'

‘You know – *the* boy.’

Christobelle’s single eye scrunched happily. It was bright red, a few shades lighter than her hair. Over her right eye she wore a pale pink, heart-shaped shell – at least, over the place her right eye had once been. It had been taken by the man who’d taken her heart. A young sailor, a fisherman she’d loved at a distance. A salt-blooded shore-dweller in love with both worlds – his feet had been planted firmly on land, but his boots had slowly been flooding.

Longing lured her too close to his ship and, unawares, he caught her in a net. He pinned her to the deck and saw the future in her left eye – a vision of fame and golds richer than the love in his present. He’d be the owner of the beautiful mermaid in the travelling freak show. His fingers dug into her shoulders.

Frightened, Christobelle writhed and cried out, kicking him with her powerful tail. The sailor hit her across the face, and then in her shocked right eye he saw another vision – the fury of the sea personified, roiling black waves and a shipwreck at midnight. His death at her clawed hands, his throat clogged with her blood-red hair.

The sailor held the mermaid down with his rubber boot, and with his knife he gouged out her right eye, that dire future he saw there. If she didn’t stop fighting, he threatened to slice off her scales one by one with his rusty knife, to spill her lovelorn fish guts on the decking and drag her to the freak shows as a taxidermied mer-witch.

The eye was all he took from her before the promised future came. Christobelle managed to tangle him in her hair and drag him overboard. She kept his drowned skeleton in a sea cave and visited it from time to time, weaving seaweed through his ribs, laying funeral wreaths of coral, loathing and laughing and mourning at the grave of a most-beloved enemy.

Somehow, Christobelle was still in love with the idea of love.

‘He’s really nice,’ said Isola, ‘but it wouldn’t be fair to drag him into all this.’

‘Into what?’

‘You know.’ Isola waved a hand at her world at large. ‘*This*.’

‘You fancy him,’ teased Christobelle.

‘I’m also on the radar of a violent ghost,’ retorted Isola. ‘He deserves better than me. Me and that dead girl.’

Grape was freestyling back towards the deep end. Christobelle slipped back into the water, giving Isola a knowing wink.

‘It wouldn’t be smart,’ added Isola. ‘My head’s saying no.’

The mermaid smiled, highlighting another disfigurement – the beauty spot where the sailor she once loved put a hook in her mouth and popped it out her cheek to silence her screams.

‘The only common factor between our hearts and our heads,’ said Christobelle wisely before she sank away, ‘is the first three letters.’

Bloodpearl Girls

An Avalon legend told of the Bloodpearl Mermaid, a vengeful creature that drowned men who dared to look at her, spirited children into seacaves, cursed women with barren wombs, lured ships onto rocks, poisoned fish hauls, and summoned storms. They said she would sprinkle sand and the blood she had spilled in the bubbly pink flesh where her right eye once was. She would freeze her victim's blood in arctic waters, cover her eye with a breast-pink, heart-shaped seashell, and once a year she would peel away the shell to find a marbled white-and-pink pearl there, a bloodpearl. She would add the pearl to the string in her hair, counting each year she had lived imprisoned under the glassy sea, like marks on the cell-block wall, notches in a bedpost.

'Christobelle,' eight-year-old Isola had asked tentatively, 'are you the Bloodpearl Mermaid?'

Wringing out her flamingo-flush of hair as they had sat at the cliff-base rocks, Christobelle had laughed gaily. 'They call me many things, *querida*,' she'd said, mimicking Alejandro's accent. 'It's wise to ignore gossip, but there are advantages in having, ah, a *reputation* such as mine.'

It wasn't an acceptance or a denial, and Isola didn't understand her answer at the time, but now, at sixteen, she recalled it as she memorised all the labels pinned to her back with sharp glares from the other girls. Mostly it was variants of 'strange' and 'unfeeling' and 'did you hear about her mother'. A reputation. It didn't matter if it were true, only if it were something she could work with.

❄

Downtown Avalon was flooded and half the plum tree's Christmas decorations had washed away in the recent rains; the rest were back inside,

on the plastic Christmas tree that Isola had set up in the lounge because she knew it rallied Mother's spirit, even when the winter brought her low.

Instead, at the base of the plum tree, Isola was building a shrine. There, she placed pictures of the tree across time, its growth measured against that of a pigtailed toddler Isola, a school-uniformed Isola who blinked at the flash, a pouty adolescent Isola who wouldn't look into the lens.

The rain came heavier as the ice winds began to blow, and she nailed an umbrella into the trunk, sheltering the altar. There were candles and tributes, and stapled to the roots was a photocopied picture – a woman in black; a punk in slinky leather trousers and boots for kicking kingdoms down.

When the weather was drier, she read to the plum tree again, this time choosing a story where nature was a character, which featured a heroine of the girls-who-kill variety, to try and appeal to the tree's fighting spirit.

Clearing her throat, she huddled closer to the trunk, and began to read:

She had a flush of rainbow-rinsed hair, like them, and a small white horn protruding from her forehead like a tiara, a mark of her birthright.

The herd had found her as a newborn, a shivering lump left at the base of a weeping willow tree. She was sticky and cold, blue rapidly flooding her strange limbs. They thought her a malformed foal, with a pinkish-white coat and an oddly flat face.

The head of the herd was an ancient unicorn named Dark. He watched with cold black eyes while his mate, Moon, lowered her head and licked the strange creature clean. As she did so, the creature seemed to melt free from death's stony clutch. She was wailing; she was alive. She stirred, and they realised she was the creature called *human*, but not quite.

Dark informed them all in his wise voice that the creature was what was called a *Lady*. Whether birthed from unicorn mare or foundling girl, they did not know; their Lady's mother was never found, although all night they combed the woods for a bleeding, wandering mother, finding neither a splash of silver-blue blood nor the distinct footprints of another Lady.

As the weeks passed, and the foundling nestled in Moon's thick mane, the unicorns argued amongst themselves, unable to agree on her name. She'd never cried, not after that first night when they'd found her – she'd simply watched the herd with large bright eyes and a serious face. Her first word had been 'Dark', not spoken but sung in a voice like dew, like mist, like comets.

And it was Dark who had suggested it, in the usual tricky cadence of the unicorn:

Our Lady is everything; our Lady is all.
And Lady shall be the name of the foal.

She will sing like a songstress and dance like a princess
be gentle as Ladies but hunt like a huntress.

The unicorns loved her, despite her malformities. They weren't sure of her lineage; by design or intention, she was at least part unicorn and they loved that part of her the most. At dusk, she would hunt with the strongest of the males. At dawn, she would frolic with the foals, curling her odd fingers through their multi-hued hair.

Nineteen summers had passed since the herd had found her, and she could still keep pace with their galloping – but on small white feet rather than hooves. Together, they were as fast as the wind, like poison darts.

She rode on Moon's back until she was older, until she was braver, and then she would tangle her fists in Dark's wild rainbow mane, and they would gallop together. He was the fastest, strongest and oldest of the unicorns.

He was the first to vanish when the hunters came.

❄

Old Moon flicked her tail nervously. Her anxious breath was hot on the back of the Lady's neck. Dark had been missing for two days now. Moon and the Lady had hidden the herd in the depths of a jewel-walled cave before following the drag marks in the dust – the occasional splotches of Dark's silver goodbye-blood. The trail had led them to the weeping willow – her mother-tree, the Lady had come to believe – and to the semicircle of sixteen hunters.

There was no sign of Dark.

The hunters were also that odd creature called human, that much they could tell, but unlike the Lady their eyes and manes were mud-coloured, and their foreheads were smooth. They had draped themselves in matter entirely foreign to the forest.

Oh, mother-tree, thought the Lady, *please deny them your shade. Make the hunters leave our home.*

But the hunters were stretching out on the grass, gulping from water-skins, comparing the carcasses of small furry creatures to one another's kills.

Moon tugged at the Lady’s mane with her teeth. Silently, they retreated into the hot woods.

❄

Moonlight. Humid mist. The Lady was too hot to sleep. She longed to curl up against Dark’s silky belly. Dark was coldness – like seasalt, like winds washed inland from faraway ice worlds, like the rolling thunderclouds. Without Dark, the herd was without a compass, a night without stars to navigate by.

The Lady sang songs and played with the foals, but she could also hunt, and she did so alone, without telling anyone, even old Moon. She sang as she hunted, making birdcalls to the forest and bubbling songs of apology to the fish as she slashed open their bellies.

As light began to spill into the clearing where the herd slept, the Lady returned with an armful of fish, berries and roots for her fellows. Old Moon was gone, the flattened grass at the edge of the clearing a mark of where she had lain.

She roused the herd and they followed Moon’s trail, trotting silently together; the Lady led, with Seaweed and Pearl, the oldest unicorns after Moon, following close behind. At the weeping willow tree they found no hunters, only a smear of blood trickling down to the roots.

The Lady fell to her hindknees and dug up the stained mud before it could reach the roots. Her tree-mother would not feed on her unicorn-mother.

❄

In the night, one by one, the unicorns were vanishing. Lady led the herd to rocky outcrops of cliff, to flooded pools, to caverns under waterfalls, to dense copses of trees. Yet every morning, she would awake to find another missing, another patch of blood, a spattered scuffle.

She went sleepless, and during the day would move the frightened herd again, but when they split to hunt, the parties would return one member less. They became a creature slowly shedding its limbs, its skins, and the Lady felt that parts of her strange hybrid body were breaking off too – she

buried a piece of herself in the woods, strung another up in a tree, lost a limb in the river – until she was a shadow of herself, a rumour.

And, finally, there was only one unicorn left.

The tiny foal was the offspring of Seaweed and Pearl; they had called him Dusk, a nod to his grandfather, Dark. Seaweed had vanished in the night, and the Lady abandoned herself to Dusk's care. She kept him with her always, and spent her days foraging, hunting and singing, and at night she stroked his black coat, handfed him a paste of berries and meat, and sang to him in a comforting voice. She slept as little as possible. They never had enough to eat, or tricky enough places to hide – the foal was too young to run fast, too weak to climb rocks, too sleepy to travel far or to hunt for long. Lady rested her head against him, felt the shudder of his heart through his glistening coat – not cold like Dark's had been, but cool, like a dip in a briny pond. Dark diluted.

Sixteen unicorns had disappeared. Her herd was no more. Their hiding places had run out. They had reached the edge of the woods.

❄

The smoke attracted her, and the smell. Searing flesh. Meat, but meat gone wrong – something warm bloody squishy perfect, now fried to an awful charcoal.

The Lady peered through the foliage at the forest's edge, the foal burrowing its nose into the small of her back. Before her stood a log cabin – she knew it from Dark's descriptions, a kind of trapping-forest that humans ensnared themselves in, surrounding themselves in deadwood and false greenery. She did not like the smell. She did not like the smoke rising from the funnel in the cabin's roof. Whenever there was smoke, the unicorns would take it for a forest fire, and the herd would gallop to high ground, plunge into the waterfall, press their bodies together and shiver with fear.

The Lady was shivering now.

Night fell. The foal was mewling, hungry and tired. He bit her fingers when she tried to stroke him. They watched the smoke grow thicker, sniffed the changing scents. Winter was arriving, and the foal was shivering, too – not from fear, as she was, but from cold. She did not want little Dusk to die.

He was the herd’s last baby, Seaweed and Pearl’s only bequest. Dark’s last star.

Then, movement in the cabin – the entrance opened, and the line of sixteen hunters, clad in foreign furs, moved out in the darkness, calling jovially to each other. The Lady held her breath as they passed her and the foal. Then came noises like the popping of logs in fires.

Dusk was shaking violently. Without the pressing warmth of the herd surrounding him, he wouldn’t survive the harsh winter. His coat was like ice and there was nothing comforting in the feeling.

The Lady feared the hunters and the strange place they lived in, but she feared losing Dusk more. She urged him up and led him into the cabin.

Inside was a blazing fire contained in a strange rock cave, platters of meats and fruits, and purplish, glutinous liquid in glasses.

And on the walls, mounted on high plaques, were sixteen unicorn heads.

The foal collapsed in front of the fire, weak and shivering, squeezing his black eyes shut.

The Lady fell to her hindknees, too, her odd limbs trembling madly, Dark’s name printed on her lips in silent black ink. He was the grisly centrepiece, his golden horn protruding regally from his downy forehead.

As she watched, he blinked his cold black eyes and his neck shifted slightly. He looked down upon her, the Lady who had spent her days and nights balanced on his forequarters, who knew his every sinew, every ridge along his spine.

He opened his dead mouth and spoke, in his usual tricky cadence:

We are proud of you, Lady, but this we must ask;
You must hunt the hunters if you are to save Dusk.

Beside him was Moon. The Lady’s precious unicorn-mother blinked her long lashes and said:

And when you are safe, you must do as I ask;
Go to the forest of metal and glass.

The other heads on their mounted plaques stuttered into life; they cricked their long necks and stared down at her and spoke in unison, their voices mingling, echoing:

Spill blood for blood spilt, and save the foal Dusk
Then you will avenge what has happened to us.
Lady, we love you, we're glad you were born,
But once they are dead, you must cut off your horn.

She knelt there, crying at the sight – her herd without those strong shoulders that had borne her all her life, never to gallop again.

They gave the same advice on loop, chanting it. Dark regarded her with his cold eyes and waited.

Then be happy, not sad, for you're always with us,
When at last you are safe, you'll do what we ask:
Cut off your horn and go protect Dusk
Go to the forest of metal and glass.

She didn't hear the steady march of boots in a line. She didn't notice the hunters return until they were spilling through the door, roaring and falling about each other, upending the trays, painting the walls with the thick liquid like bloodpaint. One unhitched his gun – Lady knew 'gun' from Dark, a word that dropped like a hot bubble of hatred from his mouth when he once described evil to her – and the Lady roused the foal and ran, tripping over furniture. She twisted her body and leapt through the window – opening cuts and splattering blood – and the foal leapt after her, scraping his flanks against the sill, and the thundercrack of the guns gave chase.

Dusk and the Lady cantered into the Safe Place, the Woods, while hot bullets embedded themselves in the trees around them; and the Lady sang for help, screaming beautiful pleas, rousing every creature who knew her voice. At the waterfall, she instructed the mermaids and nereids to hold the foal in the water, to hide him below but keep him from drowning. Wordlessly, they converged on Dusk, and wrapped him up in their pale-green arms, their reedy hair. The blue scales on their arms and cheeks glistened in the faint moonlight. Only the foal's head was kept above water. His mane was a short fuzz, not a wild mass like the Lady's, and he had not yet grown into his stubbed horn. Dusk glared resentfully up at her, too young to understand.

The birds circled the forest, and piped the hunter’s positions in music notes to the Lady. The woodland creatures scampered along boughs, telling the trees to hide nothing from the Lady tonight. They obligingly parted their leaves and allowed the faintest trickle of moonlight to fall to the forest floor, a rinse of white for the Lady to see by. It was more than enough for her.

The name misled her; she believed that being called ‘hunters’ meant that the humans could kill like her. She was proved wrong, and she found easy satisfaction in her work that night, although she had never before hunted with no intention of eating.

There were sixteen of them, and she took the time to hunt each individually. The Lady lured them to rocky crevasses, into the depths of the cold pools of the river. She drove them up trees and into quicksand and into the earth itself, and each time, she would catch them and sing them songs in the only language they understood, like she did with all her kills. She pinned them to the earth and sang to them of death. She sang in a voice like blood, a voice that spilled warmly, that bubbled, that darkened, that pooled over them. She thought she saw understanding in their eyes before she drove them through with her horn.

The sixteenth was the easiest. Panicking, hearing the Lady’s bloodsongs carried on the wind, the death-screams of his fellows, he was running back to the cabin. She waited for him in the doorway, warmth and light from the fire spilling in a halo around her. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw her. She had cut off her horn as instructed, and was standing in her skin-coat, her coloured mane tangling about her body as she watched his odd expression. He stared at her body, which she had always thought freakish, malformed, but his face said otherwise. She extended a hand, and lured him forward with a murmured lullaby, her voice like a shooting star.

The last hunter fell into her arms, and in her hidden hand she raised the ivory-white horn.

❄

The Lady and the unicorn foal travelled for days, following the smoke, the acrid smell of searing meat, until eventually they found the forest of metal and glass that old Moon had spoken of. A *city*, it was called, and there the

Lady traded her mane and her horn in a bustling market, knowing they'd both grow back.

After the trade, a hornless lady, the first she'd ever met, led her to a staircase, and under the cover of darkness Lady led Dusk up, up, up, until they came to a room not unlike the cabin of the hunters, except with material like soft moss coating the floor, and waterfalls that pooled into shallow basins at a touched command. She soothed the weary foal, stroking his nose and braiding his mane, and he nuzzled into her lap. Together, they slept on the false-moss floor, the windows thrown open letting in the awful smell but also the wind, the cold moonlight, a sense of home.

Early the next morning, the Lady bedecked the room to look more like their forest. She gathered wildflowers from the square of greenery nearby, and shovelled dirt on the strange spongy floor, and later, while the foal was nibbling on carrots torn up from a stranger's garden, she mounted her trophies on the walls.

Sixteen hunter's heads in a row.

Edgar’s Shadow

There he was in the leaf-littered court again, appearing like a mischievous shadow with his pink skateboard. Wind tugged his curls this way and that. The asphalt was rain-slicked. She sat reading under the quickly thinning tree, hiding her grin between the pages, while he pulled nonchalant tricks up the court – before a great clatter and a shout of ‘OW!’ jolted Isola right out of her storybook.

Edgar was sprawled near Boo Radley’s house, the back wheel of his snapped skateboard rolling gleefully away.

‘Edgar! Are you all right?’ She hurried towards him and tried to help him sit up. ‘What is it? What hurts?’ she asked, hovering anxiously.

‘My pride,’ he groaned.

‘Do you need an ambulance?’

He grimaced, shaking his head. ‘Ah, but my board could use a hearse,’ he said, catching site of the broken axle. Wincing in pain, he clutched at his leg where a dark stain was rapidly spreading.

Isola swatted his hand away and rolled up his trouser leg. Midway up his calf was a spectacular gash, bloodied with bits of scrubbed flesh; a meat pizza.

‘Oh, cool,’ said Edgar, peering at the wound.

‘Cool?’

‘Yeah.’ He shifted slightly, and his whole leg began to shake. He said with false bravado through clenched teeth, ‘Doesn’t even hurt.’

‘Wait here,’ she told him. She made to stand, but he grabbed her hand.

‘Wait! Mum’s inside – I can’t let her see!’

‘What?’

‘Just . . . just take me to your place. Please? If Mum sees that I’ve gone and done this –’ The plea loomed large in his eyes.

‘But, Edgar, you’re gonna need stitches,’ she said in confusion. ‘You have to go to the hospital.’

‘No!’ The remaining colour drained from his face and towards his leg; the trickling blood looked suddenly redder. ‘You can stitch it.’

Isola thought involuntarily of Wendy Darling in her nursery, sewing Peter Pan’s wayward shadow back to his muddied feet. She blanched. ‘What? No! Edgar, I can’t!’

‘Please.’ He squeezed her hand between both of his, a fleshy Venus flytrap. ‘*Please*, Isola.’

Isola shook her head. ‘I can clean it up, but I can’t –’

‘You sew your dresses, right?’

She spluttered. ‘That’s not the same!’

‘But it’s the same principle.’

‘Why won’t you go to the hospital?’ Isola demanded. She had half a mind to leave him in the gutter and fetch Mother Poe herself.

‘I can’t stand hospitals,’ said Edgar, anguish in his voice Isola didn’t think had anything to do with the wound. ‘Besides, my mum – I already told you, she moved us out here because she was afraid of some radiowaves. If she sees this, she’ll move us to the moon.’

Isola bit her lip.

Edgar, grimacing, flicked some gravel out of the gash. ‘I’m sorry, it’s so gross,’ he apologised. ‘Does blood freak you out?’

‘Um, no,’ said Isola truthfully. She had an intimate relationship with blood. Vivien’s Wood was fraught with risks. She’d had a childhood of climbing trees and rolling down hills and wading barefoot into rock pools. Every mark on Isola’s body was accompanied by a strong remembrance of the time and place; the slits, the grazes and splinters, welling or oozing or pin-pricked or sloppy with blood.

She even remembered her first period. A Thursday, high summer, a shock of stickiness between her legs. When she’d got to the bathroom and stripped, she’d found that the bright blood spilling down had spelt out her name in luminous red letters, printed in twin on both thighs like those butterfly paintings she’d made in nursery school.

‘C’mon, Isola. Please.’

‘Well . . .’ She hesitated, but tugged him upright anyway. ‘I guess I wouldn’t want to upset Lotus Blossom.’

Edgar gave a pained smile; his face was almost the same colour as his teeth. ‘You can’t upset a Lotus Blossom. Only uproot it.’

Just then, the hermit emerged from his squalid house, splaying like a spider in his crooked doorway and yelling, ‘Oi! Get away from m’ house! Jezebel’s daughter!’ He pointed a gnarled finger at Isola. ‘Ezekiel thirteen eighteen! “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against your magic charms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds!”’

Edgar turned to stare down the hermit, wincing as he put weight on his injured leg. ‘Hey!’ Then he looked confusedly at Isola. ‘Did he just insult you?’

Isola shrugged. ‘With a Bible verse, so I don’t think it counts.’

‘And you, boy!’ Boo Radley shouted at Edgar. ‘Revelation eighteen twenty-three! “The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again.”’ His accusatory finger swung back to Isola. ‘“By your magic spell all the nations were led astray!”’

‘C’mon,’ said Isola, ‘he’s not worth arguing with. All the sense went out of him when his wife died.’

They turned and headed towards Number Thirty-six, Edgar limping and Isola supporting him, as Boo Radley yelled down the street after them, ‘“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!”’

‘Exodus twenty-two eighteen,’ groaned Isola, already tiring under Edgar’s weight. ‘He’s been giving me that one for years.’

Isola’s Nursery

So this was the way, Edgar thought to himself. In this castle behind the woods, a young suitor’s blood was the only price that could be paid to gain entrance to the princess’s chambers. The hallway to her bedroom was rigged with trick mirrors and family portraits. He only caught blurred glimpses of a family of three.

Her room was just as he’d imagined it: a crucible of strawberry lipglosses and ouija boards, a Hello Kitty acid trip. There were teacups everywhere with the bottoms coated in leaf flakes; flaky images of the future.

Isola lowered him gingerly to the bed and fetched a first-aid kit from the bathroom. It was brimming with the usual (band-aids, gauze, tweezers, eye drops) and the slightly bizarre (compression bandages and splints for snakebites, sanitised eyepatches, a cartoonish pamphlet of instructions for on-the-spot amputations).

‘At least you’re prepared for anything,’ he quipped. ‘Where’s the zombie survival shelter?’

‘Underground,’ she replied, sitting on the floor and swabbing the gash on his leg, ‘with shotguns, liquor and canned brains. So we can try and get used to the taste, you know.’

Her hair was pinned up, a turban of curls; she had purplish autopsy fingernails. She’d recently switched her Lolita fashion for a kind of burnt-out-goddess look: oversized shirts with loud slogans like VAMPIRISM BITES and FREE MARIE ANTOINETTE; ratty boots spray-painted gold and studded with plastic jewels and miniature Union Jack flags; red lip-stain as though she’d just been eating raspberries.

Edgar watched as Isola cleaned the area of gravel flecks and stripped skin, then sanitised and threaded a needle.

‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I *really* hate hospitals.’

‘It’s fine.’

The needle pierced his skin. He stiffened reflexively but kept his mouth firmly closed.

While she diligently stitched, he peered at the smatterings of freckles on her arms, and felt the calluses on her sewing-toughened fingertips. The necklace he'd thought a pumpkin was actually a heavy gold ring on a chain.

Up close, he could tell her eyelashes were blonde, but she disguised them with mascara as thick as paint. He could see the downy fuzz at her hairline and on the nape of her neck, the dark roots growing though her Nordic white-blonde dye, the mole on her left earlobe, the freshly picked scab under her chin.

She was so beautiful. Only the blind would think her invisible, whatever she said otherwise.

She could have been a teenage Wendy in her nursery, gently sewing shadows to the wild boy's feet. Edgar glanced down just as the thread began to zigzig.

'You stitch like Frankenstein,' he complained.

'Doctor Frankenstein,' Isola corrected. 'I'm sure he didn't go to medical school to be forever associated with a monster.'

'I was referring *to* the monster.'

'And it's a common mistake for people to refer to the monster as "Frankenstein". Honestly, Edgar, read the classics or don't ever reference them.'

Edgar smiled before quickly grimacing as he twisted his face away from Isola's ministrations. He peered around the room, spotting a photograph of a much -younger Isola with her parents. Isola's mother was a look-alike in brunette; he still hadn't seen her. He'd barely glimpsed her father. Number Thirty-six was an oversized dollhouse, all the furniture and lived-in airs for show. Already he noticed the quiet; missing the rambunctiousness of his siblings, the clatter-forever of children in the house.

Isola continued sewing quietly. The wound began to grin at him.

A minute passed before he put the question out like a velvety feeler. 'So, is that James bloke your boyfriend?'

'He's a friend who is a boy, yes,' said Isola. 'I've known him for years. We've been fighting lately, though.'

Edgar tried again to force an admission he didn't want to hear. 'Lover's quarrel?'

‘More like tension between two people who have spent far too much time together and have now memorised one another’s flaws,’ explained Isola. She smiled sweetly, and added, ‘Which of your steady stream of visitors is *your* beloved?’

Edgar laughed. No-one had come to see him. Aurora Court was adrift from the rest of the world, a patch of semi-suburban wilderness too hard to find, and once inside, too difficult to find your way out of again.

‘I haven’t had a girlfriend. Not since Lenore died, anyway.’ He sighed.

He picked up the book with the golden French title and the English translation beneath from her bedside table. It opened to the last page, to a woman with razor-sharp angles, feathered black hair, feline eyes. The photograph was only loosely secured. Edgar lifted the photo. ‘Hey! There’s something written here –’

‘No!’ Isola slammed her hand over his, crushing the picture flat. ‘I know. I don’t wanna see it!’

‘What? Why?’ Edgar tried to pry a corner of the photograph up.

‘Because I can’t stand to know what it says, okay?’

‘It’s probably just a dedication to whoever owned the book before you, or a bit of graffiti –’

‘Or it’s a note written by Lileo Pardieu!’

‘Shouldn’t that make you want to read it even more? You worship her.’

‘Yes, and that’s precisely the reason!’

Isola wrenched the book from Edgar’s grasp and hugged it to her chest. ‘These books are incredibly rare, even in France. Lileo might have put them together herself. And she died young. There are no more Pardieu stories. And if she wrote that note, then that’s the only Pardieu I’ve never read. Don’t you understand why I want to hold on to that? To keep her last words to me a secret?’

She shoved the book under the bed and resumed her stitching. Edgar made a mental note never to mention Lileo Pardieu again.

A Heathen’s Prayer

More dead birds littered the garden of Number Thirty-six. Not just sparrows now, but tiny finches, ravens, even a bluebird, all broken at the throat, their mellifluous voices sucked out, stamped with moons like a killer’s calling card. A nest of three babies, translucent skin, featherless, harmless.

Isola rooted them out. One had been hidden in a rosebush, stuck through with thorns like a victim of an Iron Maiden, another had bounced into the centre of a sticky spiderweb on the honeysuckle shrub. Ten in total, and Isola buried them coffinless at the roots of the plum tree. The earth was starting to freeze. Her fingernails broke, the edges bleeding cherry into the dirt.

Isola could think of no fitting epigraph, no poem or silver lining. In the stapled photograph, Lileo Pardieu glared out from under her tousled hair, raccoon eyes in black.

Lileo would have to be more than a lucky charm now. She would be the patron saint, like Dymphna hanging over the nunnery-turned-high school.

‘Please, Lileo,’ Isola whispered, her dirty hands clasped in a prayer. ‘Keep them safe from her. The birds, the Poes, and the princes.’

As she said this aloud, an awful thought struck her: These strange incidents and apparitions seemed to increase when she spent time with the boy across the street. Were these wormy birds a warning, perhaps, about Edgar?

Hear the Daisies

Edgar was going away over the Christmas break. He texted Isola to come over the afternoon before he left. It had been raining, and Christobelle's single red eye winked teasingly at Isola from the puddles in the street.

'Go away,' Isola hissed, stamping in a puddle deeper than she'd fathomed. Muddy water flecked the hem of her dress.

'Look,' said Edgar, directing her to stand over the busy crater in Number Thirty-seven's backyard. 'They're finally rebuilding, the clever little scamps.'

The rabbit burrow was no longer a catacomb, but a metropolis. The crater remained, but new tunnels had been built; bridges and overpasses, intricate yet fragile. She crouched down to admire their work, their wriggling bobtails visible in the dark.

She reached down to pet one then, remembering the fangs on the black rabbit below the plum tree some time ago, she quickly withdrew her hand.

'Where are you going for your holiday?' she asked Edgar.

'Rome, to see Mum's relatives. I'll miss the snow,' he said, somewhat wistfully.

Isola shuddered, remembering the predicted blizzards. 'I hate snow.'

He snorted. 'Then you clearly hate fun.'

'Snow's not fun, it's . . . cold!'

Edgar laughed. 'So you'd like it if it were warm?'

She shrugged. 'And if rain was, like, bath-temperature, then yes, winter would be grand.'

❄

'I'm so glad to finally meet you face to face, Isola,' said Lotus Blossom, jangling with beads, her hair in a fishtail braid. 'What with the move and

then this –' she patted her protruding belly '– and now packing for this ridiculous trip, I haven't had a chance – but what a lovely name! *Isola* . . .' she repeated, chewing it around her mouth, rubbing the large bump under her blouse. Then, 'Lovely. *Lovely*. That's a nice one, too . . .'

'When's the baby due?' Isola asked Edgar as they started climbing the stairs.

'Not till April. She always goes for a Shakespeare name in the end. She just agonises over whether or not our middle names are "unique" enough.' He shook his head.

'What's your middle name?'

'If I tell you, you can't laugh.'

'Promise I won't.'

'It's Laugh.'

Stifling a burst of Edgar's middle name, Isola pressed her fingers over her mouth and asked, as seriously as she could manage, 'Where's Edgar from?'

'*King Lear.*'

'Can't say I've read it.'

'It's mental. It's got a bunch of characters running around, pretending to be completely nuts, and lots of Elizabethan special-effects, big storms and stuff – and a really gross eye-gouging scene.'

Isola thought of a handsome sailor bending over a writhing, terrified Christobelle, of a sparrow plucking a glazed blue eye from a girl strung high in a cage. She shivered.

'Edgar's a prince.'

Isola twisted on the stairs to stare at him; Edgar reached out and steadied her, even as she caught the banister and practically gasped, 'What?'

'In *King Lear*,' he explained, looking up at her, a soft concern in the creases round his eyes. 'The character I was named after.'

'Oh. Yes, of course.'

Isola turned around again, and Edgar stepped up beside her to take the remaining stairs in tandem, his hand still hovering over her lower back.

'Did your parents pick a theme, too? Is your brother called Oscar?'

A sneaky glint of humour pulsed in his pupil. How did Edgar remember what she'd said months ago, through the mask of that fog-and-laser party? She didn't know what to say. She couldn't make the same mistakes she had with James . . .

‘I don’t actually have a brother,’ said Isola, with as much conviction as she could muster, and it was like saying ‘the earth is flat’ or ‘I hate fairytales’ or ‘I don’t love my mother now that she’s sick’.

‘I thought so,’ Edgar said, and smiled. He didn’t seem mad or surprised at all. ‘Lying about your family, lying about your name – are you really even a teenage girl?’

‘Got me. I’m actually the ghost of a Spanish dandy who died two hundred years ago in an opium den.’

He led the way to his room, and there was a slight pause in conversation, like a gap between teeth. She decided to give him a glimpse into the truth; as much as he could handle without becoming a second James Sommerwell.

‘My mum . . . She’s sick because of me.’

‘What?’ said Edgar in surprise.

‘Well, it was there already. The illness, but only quietly. Dormant. When I was born, I . . . recontaminated her.’ *Parasite baby*, thought Isola. She should have melted to keep her mother from dissolving.

‘You’re not a disease, Isola Wilde.’

It was as if Edgar had heard her thoughts. Maybe his braces picked up on brainwaves.

Edgar’s room had the air of an art studio, smelling strongly of paint and charcoal, crayons and clay. It had bright posters of giant robot anime from the ’80s and of great space operas with gunslingers and busty girls, the kind full of blood spatters washed pink by American editors. His bookcase was crammed with epic fantasy, mainstream horror, and multiple editions of the *Harry Potter* novels in various states of disrepair from vigorous re-reads. Adorning the floor were ripped-knee jeans in every shade of black.

They had both trekked in mud from the yard. Isola imagined daisies and weeds sprouting from the carpet in the spring.

He kicked off his shoes, rubbing his palm over the fantastic wound that was rising into a ropey scar.

‘You know,’ said Isola pointedly, ‘I half-expected your leg to turn green and fall off.’

He blushed. ‘Sorry I made you do that. When Mum went for a scan, Dad helped me sneak into the doctor’s office next door. I needed some antibiotics, but the doc thought it was really excellent work. She kept asking me whether I knew cross-stitching.’ He made a face, turning his

scabbing wound away from her when Isola caught a glimpse of a tattoo on his bared ankle. She bent forward to look at it: a shapely mermaid reclining on the rock of his ankle bone, starfish over her nipples.

'That,' said Isola, pointing, 'is amazing.'

'Amazingly hideous,' Edgar said, grimacing. 'It'll be gone soon enough.'

'Sorry to break it to you,' said Isola, 'but soap won't cut it.'

'What about a cheese grater?' Edgar grinned at her appalled expression. 'It's not permanent, I swear. I just drew it on. I was drunk and my mate Pip convinced me it'd improve my collection. Look.' He rolled his jeans up to his knees. Above the mermaid was a rocketship, a Celtic cross, a tiger, an ankh, and an octopus sucking on the mast of a doubloon pirate ship.

'Wow! You drew all that?' Isola's eyes traced a suction cup on an octopus tentacle, the whiskers on the haughty tiger's face. 'You're brilliant. Really brilliant.'

'Cheers.' Edgar shrugged as through tossing off the weight of her compliment. 'I wanted to show you something else while you were here.' He opened his laptop, clicked the mouse a few times. 'You know Oscar Wilde wrote a poem about his sister Isola? It's called *Requiescat* – do you know it?'

Isola shook her head, and he read aloud from the screen:

Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daises grow.

All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.

Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast;
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest.

Peace, peace; she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet;
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.

Her eyes gazed into the future, and she said in a voice that seemed to emerge from deep water, 'I might've heard it before. But I can't remember where.'

She went to the precarious Leaning Tower of Sketchbooks beside his unmade bed and riffled through a book without invitation. She made an accidental charcoal fingerprint. His drawings were as intricate and beautiful as his impermanent tattoos, the sketchbooks filled with apocalyptic cityscapes, imperial horsemen and burnt-out suns. Gladiators with antlers. Strange blonde girls dressed in glass.

A graphite sketch of a wild woman in bulletproof underwear perched on the ridged crown of a dragon's head caught Isola's attention.

She smiled. 'Ruslana . . .'

'What?'

'Nothing.' She tapped the sketch. 'I like her outfit. She reminds me of someone.'

'The Whore?'

'The *what*?'

'The Whore of Babylon.' Edgar tossed pillows haphazardly on the bed and started stacking up half-finished canvases to give the appearance of a clean room. 'She's from the Bible. Pip put me on to it. I love that kind of mad stuff.'

'You'd really like Lileo Pardieu's stories, then,' said Isola mildly, tracing the Whore's wicked pencilled grin.

Suddenly the bedroom door opened, and Mrs Llewellyn entered, a rattling tub under her arm. Both Edgar and Isola sat up straighter and Isola shut the sketchbook, as though they'd been caught doing something wrong.

‘Hello, there,’ she said warmly, smiling at Isola.

Isola ducked her head, unable to shake the feeling that a scandalously intimate moment had been suspended between her and Edgar like a spiderweb, then broken with the scraping of doorframe on carpet.

‘You always forget,’ Mrs Llewellyn said under her breath as she dropped the tub in front of her son. Edgar’s cheeks reddened and he muttered something unintelligible back. His mother gave an exasperated sigh and whispered, ‘Well, there’s no need to be embarrassed.’

As Mrs Llewellyn left, Isola peered into the tub with interest, barely suppressing a flinch when she realised what was inside.

Pills. Packs, bottles and boxes of them, all with Edgar’s name on the labels. He was busily popping tablets from their blister packaging at an incredible speed, chasing them down with a glass of water, which had been precariously placed atop a tray of watercolours. He didn’t speak and Isola didn’t question him as she was momentarily trapped in the ugly past, back to when Mother was double-dosing, to the rattling that echoed down the hallway between her room and her mother’s, the bulging bathroom cabinet, the tablets swept surreptitiously under tongues.

Finally, Edgar seemed to have taken the last of his pills. He looked at her, his brow furrowed, his cheeks still flushed. He gulped down the rest of the water, and said quickly, smothering a burp, ‘They’re legal.’

‘You take more tablets than my mum,’ said Isola.

He shrugged. ‘I had a transplant. Kidney. I was entirely yellow for, like, all of last year.’

She imagined him then, with skin like the pages of an old, unpopular book. Surprised at his forthrightness, she asked, ‘And you take all these every day?’

‘Yep.’ He hiked up the front of his shirt, and her eyes flashed down and back to meet his in an instant.

Isola avoided gazing at the ugly scar across his belly, instead noticing the blush had spread to his elf-like ears. With a start, she realised he really *was* embarrassed to be telling her this, as though it were something to be ashamed of.

‘I think it looks quite rugged,’ Isola told him, and he grinned awkwardly, snorting when she added, ‘it’s like a hardcore tattoo. Done with a *knife*.’

❄

As Isola ran her mother's bath and Christobelle showed up to gossip, as usual, Isola described Edgar's inky skin to the mermaid, who flicked her fin and listened with bright-eyed interest.

'*Starfish* on her *tits*?'Christobelle giggled and cupped her breasts in bemusement. Stretched out in the bathtub Isola was filling for Mother, the mermaid wore nothing but reams of red and white pearls woven through her hair and looping over her chest. Isola was well used to her voluptuous nudity. 'How would you get them to stick?'

That night, before she fell asleep, Isola wrote 'starfish tits' on the desecrated pink wall behind her bed. She kept her journal not in notebooks but on her walls, out in the open, in a room that no-one ever came to visit. Father never even came upstairs where Mother and Isola lived, allowing their femininity to grow and tangle and choke up the rooms, girlishness running unchecked.

Nearly all of the scribbles were illegible now, years of strange-tasting foreign phrases, bad teenage poetry and cemetery epigraphs jostling for space. She wrote down everything her mother ever bade her to remember; '*Don't eat my time*' was still shining in glossy navy paint over an older, favoured Plath quote. One day, she was certain, no trace of pink would be visible under the words, the manic scrawl having turned the wall a uniform black, resembling what she imagined writer's block to feel like. All those words, reduced to meaning-lessness without the pure spaces between.

Isola would scrawl her diary in the perfect blue slate above with a skywriter if she could, or with the Wicked Witch's broomstick, *Surrender Dorothy*-style. She didn't mind if people saw, if they knew.

But if she ever etched her thoughts in the sky, no-one in the world would look up. The more she wanted to tell people, the more they determined themselves to look away.

Viking

The embattled plum tree emerged from the melting snow, officially dead. She slotted two silver coins amongst its wizened tendrils.

It had been coming for so long, but Isola was still struck silent, shocked. Father Wilde had taken it upon himself to dig up the twisted remains. Isola had watched him from the kitchen window as he sweated and struggled to thrust the shovel through the hard ground. She and the brother-princes had then gathered to give it a Viking's funeral. They'd found the driest patch of earth and had lit a bonfire in the backyard. Spots of firelight had danced on the window of Mother's room, but she hadn't come down.

Isola hadn't seen true fire in years, not unless it was twining itself around the tip of James's cigarette. There was a fantastically ornate fireplace in their house, but it was never lit. Isola didn't allow it. She was too afraid.

'What d'you mean? Why are you scared?' Father had asked.

'Because,' a five-year-old Isola had said, jutting out her chin and stamping a Lilliput foot, 'there's a scary dragon living in the chimney!'

'There's no such thing as dragons,' Father had replied gruffly.

'Yes there is! And you can't light a fire there 'cause the dragons like dark cramped places, and if we wake him up he'll get *mad*!'

Only Mother could settle her. She would gather Isola on her lap and strike the match against the brick wall, the red plume dancing witch-like in her palm. As she magicked into life a roaring fire, she would explain to Isola that the ashy chimney was devoid of slumbering dragons, just like how were no monsters in the attic, how innocent shadows didn't mean to make shapes, how only shoes lived under her bed.

Now that Mother had trapped herself under blankets upstairs, spiders spun webs in the fireplace, and if Isola listened hard enough, she thought she could hear something in the chimney.

Isola Juvenalia

Christmas break was almost over; Edgar had been sending her updates on his holiday – they were somewhere repulsively warm, and he teased her about Avalon's cold snap, and sent her blurry photos of all the Llewellyns. Isola smiled at the images of a grumpy Portia peeling patches of sunburnt skin off her forehead, the cheap plastic tourist souvenirs of which Mother Poe had bought ten, the hapless teen graffiti on priceless monuments.

There hadn't been any more signs from the dead girl, and Isola wondered whether it was the lack of Edgar that had prompted it. Still, she couldn't help but feel he was safer when they were apart, whatever country he walked in, and the thought that she, Isola, was somehow worsening Edgar's life, twinged like a proper ache at the back of her mind.

'She only turned up when Edgar moved in,' Isola said, restless fingers picking grout out of the roof tiling. 'Maybe it's better for him to stay away from me.'

'Remember, Blue Eyes,' Grandpa Furlong said as they perched on the roof once again, 'they can be jealous, these creatures, split down the middle of their very souls. Maybe she doesn't want y' to have somethin' she never will 'gain. However, that doesn't mean y' have to give up this Mr Llewellyn.' He blew a turquoise smoke ring, looking suddenly uncomfortable. 'If you ever want to talk to me 'bout, y'know, men, or 'bout takin' a lover –'

Isola gave a shocked yelp and nearly fell of the roof. 'Grandpa! Edgar's just – I mean, you don't need to give me *The Talk*. I'm sixteen and a half!'

'Y'right,' said Grandpa Furlong gruffly, his keen eyes watching from under his hat as the smoke escaped Aurora County, almost as though fleeing the awkward conversation. Isola supressed a sigh of relief, but the old man wasn't finished: 'Y'right, Isola. Y' Papa'll teach y' 'bout that when y'r older.'

❄

On the first day of term, she pulled back the curtains, her eyes watering at the painfully bright sun glaring on the slick roads. Edgar's car was in his driveway, and she smiled tiredly, glad he was back.

She stumbled to the bathroom and promptly slipped in the puddle of water streaming under the door.

'What – oh, Christ, Mum,' muttered Isola, climbing to her feet. The soaked hallway carpet wafted musty air. Water snaked towards the stairs.

Isola pulled open the door. The bright chandelier blinded her again, but through the black vision-spots loomed the familiar sight of Mother languishing in the bathtub.

Her head lolled at the edge. Her eyes were closed and still.

'*Mum!*' shrieked Isola. 'Mum, wake up!'

Isola tripped at the tub's side, wrapped her arms around Mother's naked torso and hauled her upright. The water was ice-cold. She drew back her hand and slapped Mother as hard as she could, and was rewarded with a cry of pain.

'Ouch, Sola,' murmured Mother, twisting her red-marked face away as she emerged from her unconscious state.

'Mum!' Isola felt as though cold fingers were squeezing her heart, strangling the small red bird that slumbered there. Instead of relief, she felt unbridled rage overcome her. 'What the *hell* are you doing?' she yelled. 'Have you been in here all bloody night? You could have drowned! What were you thinking?'

'You can't talk to me like that,' Mother said thickly, her eyelashes flickering like butterfly wings. 'I'm your mother.'

'So act like it! Jesus, Mum – what is the *matter* with you?'

Isola reached down and ripped the plug out by its chain. The water gurgled towards the drain.

'I came in for a bath last night . . . must've fallen asleep . . .'

'I don't want to hear it!' Isola threw her hands over her ears childishly as the wretched tightness in her chest worsened. The fright had passed; Mother was all right, but why was she feeling worse with every passing second? 'Just shut up and try to stand.' Isola tried to tug her upright, but Mother

continued to loll helplessly. ‘Mum, this is ridiculous. You could have died – oh, where’s Dad when you need him?’

She knew as she spoke that, even if he was still home, he wouldn’t bother running upstairs to help. He had hauled Mother to her feet one too many times, both literally and figuratively.

With a last groan of effort, Isola got Mother standing. She wrapped her in white towels, frantically rubbing her prunish skin.

‘Sorry, Isola.’

‘It’s all right,’ said Isola distractedly, although she was tired of hearing those two words put together. ‘I just don’t know how you could have slept here, what with the cold and the noise – maybe your medication’s too strong. When did you last see Dr Aziz?’

‘So sorry, Sola,’ Mother repeated weakly.

Isola helped Mother down the hall to the master bedroom. She still thought of it as her parents’ room, even though Mother slept here alone. Father had spent the past five years sleeping in the guestroom downstairs. He never even came up to visit her.

She bundled Mother in her dressing gown and tucked her under the bedcovers. She switched on the electric blanket, and checked the labels on the bedside pills: *May cause drowsiness. If affected, do not drive or operate heavy machinery*.

‘Or bathe, or get out of bed, or be the adult,’ she said to the bottle, her voice soundtracked by Mother’s gentle sleep-breaths, and she left the door ajar.

Downstairs: Father had already left for work. Isola overdosed on coffee and collected all the sharp objects around the house: knives, razors, scissors, a mother-of-pearl oyster fork, a letter opener topped with Nefertiti in her headdress.

Back upstairs: she rolled Mother into the recovery position, like she’d seen done to drunks at parties to stop them swallowing their tongues or choking on vomit. Then Isola read her stories even though she couldn’t hear, made soup for when she eventually woke. She even called a poisons information hotline to be safe.

She wore her school uniform all day. It only took creases to fool Father upon his return home that evening.

The next morning, Isola stood dutifully with her head down, careful not to interrupt Sister K's tirade. The nun practically blew steam out of her nostrils; an elderly cartoon bull.

'Disrespectful, arrogant, disgusting!' The nun stamped her cane against the flagstones for extra emphasis. 'Missing school for no good reason is one thing, but not bothering to call – or being contactable, either – is worse! As far as I'm concerned,' said Sister K, waggling a bony finger at Isola, 'you're on your last legs – and they're getting wobblier!'

The bell rang, and Bridget McKayde swanned past in the corridor crush, accompanied by her usual posse of time-eaters. Bridget smirked. Isola repressed the urge to give her a mocking heil.

In Isola's second year at St Dymphna's, the vicious back-and-forth between Bridget and herself had got so bad that Sister K had rung Number Thirty-six to discuss it. Father had taken the call, and had spent the evening yelling at Isola – he worked so hard to make up the tuition money, and why did it always seem to be her who escalated the situation, and why couldn't she just *ignore* those girls?

Upstairs, Mother had welcomed her into the big crumpled bed and said, 'Sola, if you really don't want to, then you don't have to go back to Saint D's. After all –'

Mother's Other Best Advice

'You can't draw champagne from a storm-water drain.'

Isola sniffed pitifully and dried her eyes on the cuff of her jumper. 'What does that mean?'

'It means you can't get anything good from an entirely bad experience.' Mother had wrapped her arm around Isola's middle, pulling her closer. 'If you want,' she muttered sleepily, 'you can stay right here with me.'

'It's not *that* bad,' Isola had said, snuggling down, and it'd been true – at least she had Grape. Besides, Bridget was twice as bad to Grape; what right did *she* have to hide out?

Since then Isola had stopped responding to Bridget and her friends' taunts, stopped hiding in the chapel or the third-floor bathroom during classes, and had learned to ignore it, to recarve her feelings from ice.

But still, life was far from champagne, and she forced herself to swallow back the day as though it were a medicine she had to take, like Mother did.

As Sister K continued to give her contemptuous dismissal – ‘And take your hem down, that skirt’s far too short!’ – Sister Marie Benedict in her old-fashioned habit passed by. The nun, who had crossed herself upon meeting Isola in the chapel, whispered, ‘I’m praying to the Virgin and Saint Dominic for you, my dear.’

Isola never paid much attention to Sister Marie, who was St Dymphna’s sole haunting. Being a time-warped split, she didn’t make much for conversation.

Right afterwards, in Religious Education, Grape flipped through a book that listed all saint patronage. Her finger tickled down the Ds.

‘Dominic . . . Dom . . . Was it St Dominic Savio?’

‘Maybe. What’s he cover?’

‘He’s the patron saint of juvenile delinquents. That sounds about right.’

Isola swatted her with a Bible.

‘He died at fifteen,’ Grape went on. ‘Bummer. And look, it has his dying words: “What beautiful things I see!”’

Sharps

There was stirring in the grass below Isola's window as the rabbits ate her mother's thyme, paws squishing softly on the wet lawn.

Isola woke up savouring the salty taste of rain. She sat up in the darkness and rubbed the sockets of her sleep-crusted eyes.

The window was half open, the black grass rippling like the sea. She took a long breath through her nose, smelling the delicious air blown in from the bay. She couldn't figure out what had woken her. It took her a moment to realise what was odd – the quietness.

No hymns from the roof.

She switched on her bedside lamp, pulse twitching like a snake bite in her neck. 'Hey! Heartbeat girl!'

A resounding crash – the ghost girl had slammed herself against the window, almost bursting it off its hinges; Isola couldn't stifle a cry of fright. The girl was crouched on the sill like a cat prepared to pounce. The reddish lamplight was sucked deep into the aching hole of her eye socket.

'Shut it UP!' the dead girl roared, a thick line of sticky red dripping down her chin. Her fists pounded on the window that separated them.

Isola leaped out of bed. '*What?*'

'Your heart!' The dead girl threw her hands over her ears, her expression tormented. 'It's so LOUD!'

As her cry crescendoed, the window shattered and glass exploded across the room. Isola felt strong arms encircle her, turn her away; a body blocking her own. She threw back her head, her gaze meeting that of her protector. Grandpa Furlong. His arms nearly crushed her, and in that moment he didn't seem like a widower ghost, a blues musician, a spider enthusiast, a gentle old man. His eyes were blazing with fury.

He released Isola. Turning, he sprung across the bedroom, colliding with the girl in the window, who shrieked and laughed in one terrible sound.

They fell away into the darkness, and Isola followed, throwing her weight against the windowsill.

‘Grandpa!’ she screamed, but the two figures had vanished, swallowed up by the shadows, and Isola had leaned too far. She felt herself slip, and would have toppled from the second storey if the arms hadn’t grabbed her, hauled her backwards off her feet and dropped her heavily on the bed. She realised, as she lifted the pressure from them, that her feet were peppered with glass from when she’d crossed the room. Grandpa had protected her from the worst of it, and slivers of fabric from his grey overcoat littered the floor, between the shards, the ruby dribbles.

‘Alejandro,’ she gasped, as the familiar concerned face swam above her. She drew a deep gulp of air, feeling as though she was breathing through a straw. ‘The girl, Grandpa –’

‘Hush, *querida*, hush,’ said Alejandro soothingly as he leaned over her.

Isola looked past him, to the gaping space where her window was, the violent cuts of glass, mostly dust and diamonds, but one long shard remained in the frame, shaped like a dagger or a crucifix, and spotted with Grandpa’s blood . . .

‘ISOLA!’ bellowed Father from the bottom of the stairs. Isola almost jumped up but Alejandro placed a hand on her shoulder. ‘What are you doing? It’s four in the morning!’

‘Nothing! Sorry!’ she shouted, but it wasn’t nothing, and she wasn’t sorry.

And the music from the roof was silenced.

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘The first dragon,’ said young Mother Wilde, ‘was Silence.’

Isola listened, eyes like awed Plutos.

‘The brothers travelled on foot and set up camp before nightfall, unaware that the band of dragons was watching them from afar, that plans were being hatched to prevent them reaching their precious quarry.

‘The first dragon waited, his shining blue scales submerged in the deep river the brothers had avoided crossing.

‘As they began their preparations for the night, the sixth brother, the youngest, musical and talkative, went to collect water from the stream.

There he met the First Dragon, who spoke intelligently and claimed a want to discuss the terms of the princess's release. The dragon lured the prince to the water's edge, and the prince's sweet voice was not heard again in this world.'

Grandpa Furlong

Sleepless Beauty

When Isola told her bed-bound mother that her broken window had allowed the frost in, Mother smiled and tossed back the sheets.

What little sleep she'd managed was exhausting in itself; it seemed to creep up and surprise her, holding her as tightly as Grandpa had in that last, terrifying moment. She woke up with the sun, gasping, and went back to her room. She sat on her bed and stared out the window at the white dawn while the cold wind tossed back her gauzy curtains and her hair, the glass shards rolling towards her. She faintly realised that they were there, too, watching her sadly. Alejandro, Ruslana . . .

Isola blinked, startled at the sight.

'Rosekin, you're back early. Winter's not quite passed.'

'It's all right,' squeaked the faerie, and Isola wondered, with a flare of irritation, whether she'd returned from warmer climates just to catch the unfolding drama.

Isola rubbed her eyes, suddenly noticing Christobelle's presence, too. The mermaid had been placed on the desk chair, and was dribbling water from a glass down her chest and tail, looking thoroughly uncomfortable.

'Christobelle,' said Isola with a tiny smile. 'Are you okay?'

Rosekin was now helpfully dipping the ends of the mermaid's blood-coloured hair in the jug on the desk.

'I'll be fine, sea child,' said Christobelle, sounding as tired as Isola felt.

They were all there, except James. Except Grandpa. She felt her ribs tighten, as if a screw had been applied to a secret keyhole in her spine.

Alejandro broached the subject first. 'I apologise, my friends. I have underestimated her.'

'She's kept Isola up all night again,' said Ruslana in a low voice, looking fiercely at Alejandro as though this was his fault. 'This can't go on.'

‘I can cope with a bit of insomnia,’ said Isola, sinking down on her bed. Alejandro moved to join her.

‘When I was alive,’ he said softly, ‘the fortune-tellers claimed that a person cursed with insomnia was being watched in their bed by a nightingale.’

She looked up at her eldest prince, while the others whispered furtively. ‘Why a nightingale?’

‘Victorians believed that the nightingale was a creature that never slept, simply because it sang all night.’

Isola frowned. ‘The Victorians were weird.’

‘Winsor says she saw her just before the sun came up – the Florence Nightingale!’ Rosekin was insisting squeakily as she fluttered over to Isola’s lap, and Isola looked down, her brows drawing together in confusion.

‘How do you know who Florence Nightingale is?’

‘Mama taught me,’ said Rosekin proudly.

‘Right.’

Mama Sinclair, Rosekin’s beloved carer, had been a nurse her whole life – she used to take Rosekin in her pocket around the hospital, letting her nibble on the endless floral bouquets that visitors brought to their patients. Mama Sinclair always wore a pin with Florence Nightingale’s portrait on her collar.

Isola frowned down at the faerie. ‘Rosey, a nightingale is a kind of bird. That’s what we were talking about.’

‘Right – a Florence Nightingale!’ the faerie said insistently, and Isola felt a smile curl her lips, which promptly vanished when Rosekin continued on in her beaming voice, ‘The Florence Nightingale from outside took Grandpa Furlong away!’

Isola swallowed her anger, reminding herself that Rosekin was probably still overexcited by all the action – she couldn’t feel much at one time, at her size, after all.

Isola looked at the room at large. ‘Where is he?’

Nobody spoke for a tense moment. Isola looked at her eldest brother, who had stood up. ‘Alejandro?’

He shook his head. ‘We do not know, *querida*.’

Ruslana, who had been leaning moodily against the wall, chewing the razor edge of her lower lip, snarled, ‘Good riddance! I’m glad to see the back of that coward!’

‘Ruslana –’

‘He abandoned her, Alejandro, don’t try to sugar-coat it!’ She drew her crooked dagger, a natural reflex. ‘I don’t know where he went, or why he didn’t call us when he saw her out there – frankly, I don’t care. If he ever comes back, he’ll have me to answer to!’

Rosekin fluttered atop Ruslana’s hand and inspected her reflection in the blade. ‘Maybe he got scared? And went away?’

‘Wouldn’t have had the guts to tell us if he had,’ snorted Ruslana.

Isola knew above else that all ghosts faded eventually, their colours running, like paintings left out in the rain, fading beyond even the sight of the Nimue-eyed. Even splits, those stains of violence left after death, were delible. But Grandpa Furlong? Would he choose to leave *now*, of all times?

‘It is true he was not a man for mawkishness or long farewells,’ Alejandro admitted, quickly adding, ‘but he would never have done so without informing Isola, at the very least.’

Ruslana put Rosekin on her shoulder and sheathed her sword, looking angrily away from him. ‘Could she have hurt him?’ Christobelle mused. She flicked water droplets down her golden scales, looking pensive. ‘I’ll admit, I don’t understand everything about you spirits, but I mean, he was already dead.’

Alejandro looked frustrated. ‘I do not know.’

They fell silent as Isola wrote the date and Grandpa’s name on the diary-wall behind her bed. Beneath it she scrawled a mantra:

SLEEP IS FOR THE WICKED

‘I believe the saying is “No rest for the wicked”, *querida*.’

‘I like my version better,’ said Isola, her voice as shaky as her handwriting. ‘Besides, you reckon I could get any sleep with that *thing* prowling around?’

‘Winsor’s always been out there,’ said Ruslana, a slight quiver of humour in her voice.

Rosekin buzzed around indignantly at this slight on her cousin.

Isola hugged her face to her knees. ‘What do I do? I’ve never had to deal with a violent ghost before.’ She felt the mattress sink as Alejandro sat at the end of the bed.

‘Luckily you did not know me when I had first died,’ he muttered.

Isola looked up. As if a secret code word had been uttered, Ruslana snatched Rosekin from the air by her translucent wings (the faerie squealed with displeasure). Pausing, she turned back and picked up Christobelle, who heaved exhaustedly, ‘Bless you, Ruslana. May your seas always be salted . . .’ and the three of them vanished tactfully through the wall.

‘Seeing your lifeless body . . . it does things to you,’ said Alejandro quietly. ‘*Querida*, please understand. The people who become ghosts have gone through a great trauma. So it was with me, and I did not die violently. I died in a selfish act of pleasure. I did not think of my mama or papa, or my little sisters, Lucía, Jacinta, sweet Francesca –’

‘Alejandro, I . . .’ Isola didn’t know what to say. She had never heard such bitterness in Alejandro’s voice. She briefly touched his sleeve, to show that she understood.

‘There is one more thing you must remember,’ he said quietly. ‘That girl in the woods did not *die*. She was killed, and it is a very distinct demise, *querida*. It hurts more. It is unnatural. Unwelcome. And she was betrayed by her mother, someone she should have been able to trust with the safekeeping of both her body and heart.’

Isola started. ‘What?’

‘Because a mother who carried and birthed you –’

‘No, what mother?’ She turned and traced the words *wood witch* on the diary-wall, written after she’d first heard the story from Ruslana. ‘Ruslana said that this girl – Florence, or whatever you want to call her – was killed by her mother, but I know every Child of Nimue that’s passed through that forest, and I’ve never met this witch.’

❄

There were no dead birds on the lawn the next day. But something else.

A rabbit, salt-and-pepper grey like Grandpa Furlong’s wiry eyebrows. Strangled. Some kind of wire was looped around its throat. Isola unknotted

it, stroking the rabbit's head all the while, as though it still needed comforting, wherever it was.

She inspected the murder weapon. A mandolin string.

She buried the rabbit corpse in the hole left by the plum tree and didn't tell her brothers.

Girls and Unicorns

In bed Isola reread *Lady of the Unicorns* by red lamplight, her new window firmly double-bolted. Enter Mother, who did not look much better than the plum tree had in its last days. She'd somehow gotten thinner. Her cheeks were like shallow graves.

'What are you reading?' Mother asked, even though she surely knew the answer; Isola read it constantly and there was no mistaking that dark binding, the golden glaze on the pages' edge.

'"*Les Fables et les Contes de Fées de Pardieu*",' Isola recited, and Mother chewed her lower lip, looking upset.

'You should take a break from her,' Mother muttered, scrunching up her freckles in worry. 'Madness like hers is catching.'

Isola quirked her eyebrow at this. She was sounding like Father when he'd railed against '*those bloody fairytales!*'

'Lucky I'm immune.' Isola shifted generously, and Mother climbed into her bed. They tangled their limbs and their fingers and hair.

There was one story in the Pardieu book that Isola hated. *Wolverine Queen* – a treatise on mothers and daughters, with nothing but unhappy endings on each page, sometimes at the end of each paragraph. Mother had said that the story had come from the author's 'blue period, like the one Picasso had'. On those pages the women cut each other until they were ribbons, thinned into fragile streams. Isola had hated that story, partially because it was the only one that she read brand new in the book, the only one Mother had never told her as a bedtime story. Maybe without the sheen of nostalgia it was just a bitter love letter a Frenchwoman wrote to another, and it made something in Isola's skin tingle and twitch. Sometimes she resented her mother but she never hated her, never dreamt of such a thing. She pitied those who did hate their own mothers. Not having a mother would be like losing six brothers at once. Who would look out for you then?

‘I don’t want you walking through the woods anymore,’ Mother whispered.

Isola’s stomach tightened. So Mother sensed it too: the evil below the window, the girl in the dark.

‘I just have a feeling,’ Mother went on anxiously. ‘It’s not safe right now. Please, Sola.’

Isola promised and shushed and soothed her.

It had been different, once. Like twins they’d felt each other’s pain and shared nonsensical dreams. Mother would cry whenever Isola got an injection or a scraped knee. Sometimes she’d even felt it before it happened.

But Mother didn’t seem to feel it anymore. If Isola had fallen and come home to show Mother the bloodied tears in her stockings, Mother wouldn’t be peering out the window in waiting or anxiously clutching her knee. She’d be in bed or in the cakey bubbles of the bath. Sometimes she’d be crying, but it had nothing to do with her daughter.

Isola’s bloody knees and needle-punctured arm crooks were trivial now, submerged in a pain too deep to fathom. Even now, snug under the feather quilt, Isola could feel the bed tilting, the deck of a ship at sea, as Mother puddled into the mattress, vanishing into herself.

‘Tell me a story,’ said Mother huskily, and Isola began, not a Pardieu or a Grimm or an Anderson or a Perrault, but another Isola Wilde original, with Spanish dandies and eye-gouging sailors and boys named after Shakespearean plays. The tapestry spun from the wheel; they watched the ceiling as the coloured threads webbed, the words came together, and the invented universe breathed in for the first time.

❄

‘D’you think you could drive me to school today?’

Father picked toast crumbs out of his sand-coloured beard. ‘You love walking in those woods, though.’

‘Not at the moment. I don’t feel safe there. Besides, both Mum and Ale–’ She clamped her hands over her mouth, but the damage had been done.

Father’s eyebrows crushed all the warmth from his eyes. His bushy beard twisted to form a scowl. ‘What have I told you?’ he roared. ‘Isola, you are

too old for imaginary friends!’

Bride and Gloom

'There is no exquisite beauty . . . without some strangeness in the proportion.'

– Edgar Allan Poe

Death Wears Curls

Isola was never alone for a moment. The brother-princes had been taking shifts to watch over her, like clockwork companions. The others searched all over for signs of Grandpa Furlong, but not a single Child of Nimue had seen him or so much as smelled his distinct cigar smoke or heard a mandolin note.

Isola was still surrounded by death.

When Isola was nine, the Wildes had gone to London to see a new doctor, a new offer of hope. They'd driven past the house where the poet Sylvia Plath had plugged the under-gaps of doorways with soaked towels to keep the invisible tendrils from reaching her sleeping children – both the gas from the oven and the death that lived in her blood. The desire that would surely jump hosts if it had half the chance; a possession.

Isola had been certain, for some time, that Sylvia Plath was a girl like her. That her eyes saw through to the next dimension like her own, like Mama Sinclair's had, like Lileo Pardieu.

'Hello, Sylvia Plath.'

'Hello, Isola Wilde.'

Sylvia Plath had a perfectly curled fringe even in death. She'd smoothed the wrinkles in her dress, her anxious forehead.

They'd sat for awhile on a bench outside the clinic while Father had read the newspaper and picked scabs around his worry-bitten fingernails. Isola and Sylvia had whispered about where it came from, this thing they shared. Mama Sinclair had said it emanated from the place where the Lake lapped against the Tree. Isola had thought of it as that place before turning four years old – that place where all stories came from.

Sylvia Plath had said she could never quite pinpoint its origin, but it had fed her writing, her freewheeling thoughts, and her appetite for self-destruction.

Her suffering-turned-philandering husband had called it her ‘cosmic circus’ – that majestic inner world, the Nimue world, the neon marrow she needle-drew from her bones and sculpted, as it hardened, into poetry.

Sylvia Plath was a girl like Isola. Sometimes it worried Isola that all her heroines were dead.

Isola was convinced that her other role model, Lileo Pardieu, was a Child of Nimue – how else could her stories be full of such truths?

Summoning a ghost she didn’t personally know was akin to shaking awake a sleepwalker – it could never be foretold how they would react, if they would see Isola and her coven of the supernatural as a threat. But she couldn’t help herself, the idea clouded her brain like a fugue until, at the end of last summer, before Edgar, before Florence, she had tried to conjure Lileo Pardieu in a séance. She’d roped in James to help her, and although he’d kept saying, ‘no, no, no,’ he’d never taken his finger off the glass. Isola had seen his eyes reflected, looming doe-wide, as if the glass had been the rifle eyeing him for his pelt.

She’d chosen to call for Lileo after Mother had tried to burn Isola’s favourite book. Isola had swooped down and had pulled the book away before the chimney’s kindling caught the attention of the dragon, who had already been stirring at the delicious flicker of flame. Tears had collected as question marks on Isola’s cheeks. Mother couldn’t explain why she had done it.

The guest of honour had never shown up. The cake had gone soggy and the tea had turned cold. She had a lonely party over the crumb-sprinkled Ouija board and Isola had read the fables aloud in her own voice again that night.

Horrorshow

Nights were a constant battle now. She couldn't sleep with the singing, even with Alejandro murmuring Spanish in her ear. What he recited she didn't know – a story, a secret, a grocery list – but it soothed her nevertheless, and sometimes she plucked out familiar words from the tangle like *princesa*, *querida*, *bella* . . . synonyms he used for 'Isola'.

After Rosekin's pronouncement, they'd taken to calling her Florence – 'the dead girl' was starting to sound rather informal, considering how hard she'd scratched at the bubble round their lives, how viciously she fought to get in.

All night Florence sang, and to Isola it was the howl of an air-raid siren.

The little sleep she did manage was cut up with nightmares – doors opening, bright light instantly evaporated; she was blind, with Spanish coins for eyes; the seacave was flooding with the rising of the tide; the hand she gripped in panic was fleshless.

When the dawn-heralding birds started squawking, before their terrified voices were cut off by a noose of cold hands and silver links, Isola found that, for the first time, even Alejandro's words – like Lileo Pardieu's – failed to bring her comfort.

Edgar Allan Poe and the Zombie Mona Lisa

Edgar had a collection of death masks, which included Mozart, Beethoven, the famous fake Robespierre and L'Inconnue de la Seine – a drowned French girl with the most knowing smile. He saw the recognition in Isola's eyes, painted on every squarish tooth as she smiled up at L'Inconnue mounted on the wall, bodiless, deathless, beautiful.

They tried on masks, ate microwaved popcorn, watched a Marx Brothers movie, threw darts at the dotted ceiling.

'Listen,' said Edgar, bullseyeing the samurai poster in the ceiling corner, 'it's my birthday on Friday.'

'Congrats,' she said. 'You're barely an Aquarius, by the way. More on the cusp of Pisces.'

'Well, I just found out I'm having a party. The family's getting out of the house and everything.'

'What kind? A clown-and-cake party? A dinner party? A Communist party?'

'I don't know, Jella's planning it. She's getting some glow-in-the-dark paint or something. No-one believes that there's electricity this far out of town.'

Isola's misaimed dart hit the far wall. She pulled off the L'Inconnue mask. 'They'll stay out of the woods, right?'

He chuckled. 'I can't make any promises on behalf of thirty or so drunks, but –'

'I am not joking, Edgar Allan Poe!' she snapped. 'Tell them to stay out of the damn woods!'

The curl in her snarl sagged, and she ran an anxious hand through her hair, her knuckles and chunky rings snagging in the knots. 'Sorry. I'm not myself lately. I haven't been sleeping well.'

‘That’s all right,’ he said, slightly startled by her rapid change in mood. ‘What’s keeping you up? Good telly? Bad dreams?’

‘Something like that.’

She dropped the mask on the carpet and scattered the last of the unpopped kernels from her lap before she left. L’Inconnue smiled ruefully up at Edgar.

He glared at her dead French face. ‘What’re *you* smiling at?’

‘Folie’ Is French for ‘Mad’

‘Mental health,’ snapped Sister K in her usual brutish manner. ‘One in five of you will suffer from some form of mental disorder, and I’ll bet the rest of you will know someone who has.’

‘I know one,’ whispered Bridget in a singsong voice.

Six months after the freckle-faced boy in the leather jacket had died at a travelling fair, youth mental health was still the hot topic. Counsellors toured schools and new hotlines had sprung up, as had the list of possible reasons why he’d done it: girlfriend/boyfriend troubles, bullies, problems at home, medication, brain chemistry, family history, friendships and enemies and school issues all coming together in the perfect stew of the wrong decision.

‘Jesus H. Cricket,’ said Grape as they streamed from the classroom. ‘Adolescents these days! How many problems have we got?’ She started ticking them off on her fingers. ‘If you’re not fat, you’re depressed. If you’re not depressed, you’ve got an eating disorder. And if you’ve got an eating disorder – well, at least you’re not fat.’

Isola goggled at her. ‘*Grape!* There’s black humour, then there’s nihilism. You’re starting to sound like Jamie.’

‘Ooh, what a compliment,’ said Grape with a short bow of acknowledgement. ‘What’s old Sommerwell up to these days? I haven’t seen him in ages.’

Isola shrugged.

‘You should invite him to Eddie’s party. You know, for your plus-one.’

‘I don’t think it’s a plus-one party,’ said Isola dubiously.

‘Uh-oh,’ snickered Grape. ‘He probably should’ve written that on my invite.’

‘But he didn’t send out invites.’

Grape just winked. ‘Happy birthday, Eddie!’

❄

She knew James wouldn’t say yes, even if he didn’t have plans. Still, she was somehow relieved when he said he couldn’t make it.

‘What did you get the guy for his birthday?’

‘Nothing yet,’ said Isola, feeling the phone grow hot as a tumour against her ear. ‘Grape thinks I should jump out of a giant cake.’

Jamie chuckled down the line. ‘I guess the pleasure of your company will have to do, princess.’

Princess. It made her heart ache to hear James call her that. James, who should still be her Jamie – the second prince, the passionate brother.

They had been so close, and they mimicked it well now. The earthquake – the most major fault line in their relationship – had happened just weeks before the dead girl in the cage, before the boy who leapt from the Ferris wheel. The folly of touching lips.

The scene: the memory flickers like old film; burns and cracks in the reel. In a dark bedroom, a movie plays. *Pulp Fiction*’s diner scene. Warped Chuck Berry pipes out of the speakers. The faux-blonde and the lanky boy dance along in slow motion, acting out the scene on the television. He grabs her hand; she twirls, laughs.

A close-up: the girl smiles and the boy leans in. His lips touch hers before she flinches away.

A reaction shot: The reel shudders. Hitchcockian violins screech. It’s a horror movie now, low budget, big impact. The girl’s eyes are as big as twin planet earths. There is life and death on the continents inside them.

At last the boy turns away. His face is a death mask. The film plays on behind them.

Fade to black before the reel burns up.

A Shroud of Songbirds

On the morning of Edgar's eighteenth birthday, thirty dead birds had been arranged in a line from Isola's window to Edgar's front door. A hysterically excited Rosekin woke her at dawn, and Isola ran out into the morning mist, her bedsheets billowing cape-like behind her, a meowing Morris at her heels. Using the sheets, she collected up the birds – each noodle-necked, with wide blank eyes and lolling tongues – and went to bury them where the plum tree once stood. But that crypt was full, and so she snuck into the backyard of Number Thirty-seven, bundling the birds, sheets and all, in the crater dug for the apple tree, still unfilled these months later.

Edgar and Isola and a Party – Part Deux

The moon sat alone in the transparent sky, a lonely plastic bride on a blueberry wedding cake. A moon without stars was a princess without courtiers, and not for the first time, Isola pitied Her.

Aurora Court had never been so noisy. The cracks in the asphalt street were plugged with sound, music she was sure would echo down to the underworld. The guests had been instructed to wear white for ‘optimum effect’, whatever that meant, in a sternly worded group text from Majella Lavery.

The bride wore white, Isola reminded herself, and to mark the occasion she bought a third-hand wedding dress and slashed it short, unravelling the eighties puff sleeves and snipping loose the beading detail stained with ancient wedding cake. She skipped the veil but kept the matching wreath of dried pink roses, which she tried to dye deep red to match her shoes (she would never completely comply with any dress code) but which came out rather purplish-black like funeral flowers.

Alejandro and Ruslana checked the entire court for signs of Florence while Isola checked her make-up in the bathroom mirror, which cheekily told her that she looked ‘FAIR ENOUGH’, as she scribbled her initials on it in whore-red lipstick.

By the time she’d reached Number Thirty-seven, Isola Wilde was late.

‘Traffic?’ Edgar grinned, silhouetted in the doorway.

‘The worst,’ sighed Isola.

Patches of him shone, as though his body was riddled with glow-in-the-dark tumours. It was actually ultraviolet paint, swirls of phosphorescent colour like his washable tattoos. Someone with bad handwriting had painted ‘EDDIE’ in his thick curly hair as well as ‘18!!!’ on his cheek.

By the front door were buckets dribbling neon goo down the sides: a rainbow of paints, glow-worm drool.

‘It’s non-toxic,’ said Edgar reassuringly. ‘At least, I’m pretty sure.’

Grape darted from behind him, with exaggerated eyelashes and blue hearts on her cheeks. She was joined by Jella, who was orange polka-dotted from head to toe, as though she’d swallowed fireflies, and they squealed and converged on Isola, marbling her skin and clothes. Jella gave her shining blue geisha lips. Grape liberally coated her hair in neon pink.

‘You look like a tragic bride,’ teased Edgar, examining the wreath on her head. ‘Waiting for your . . . gloom.’ He chuckled at his own pun.

Deemed acceptable at last, they led Isola into the house. Black lights had been arranged on the walls, and the glow was stronger inside, where party-goers with intricate swirls on their forearms marked each other with tribal handprints. They shone in the darkness like jungle-born angels.

Edgar led her through the crowd, the intoxicating pulse of paint and bodies, while pints were pushed into their hands. Mirrors and windows were draped in black fabric to hide the disorientating reflections. Grape seemed to be laughing raucously in every room Isola passed through, her mouth wide and exposing her tongue, which was poisoned green from drinking shots.

‘Look,’ said Edgar, stopping to pluck a grubby slip of paper from a coffee table. ‘Boo Radley sent me a birthday card.’

Written crookedly in charcoal: *Exodus 22:18.*

Isola felt something creeping along her shoulder. She looked down to see a crazy straw passing around her, slowly finding its way into the drink in her hand, like a curious curly-beaked bird.

‘Pip!’ cried Edgar.

A lanky boy appeared between them, the straw protrouding from the corner of his grin. ‘Needs more chartreuse,’ he told Edgar. ‘Get the lady a decent drink, go on.’

The sickly sweet scent of dope wafted about Pip like hippy cologne. He had long, untidy hair and his face was painted as a neon-green skull, so stunning it couldn’t have been done by anyone but Edgar.

Edgar was laughing as he snatched away Pip’s dripping straw and threw it into the crowd of dancing legs. He gestured to Isola. ‘Pip, this is –’

‘Isola Wilde.’ Pip folded to one knee, grabbed her hand and kissed the plastic stone of her mood ring. He said her name like a detective unmasking the face of the culprit he’d suspected all along. ‘The face that launched a

thousand ifs . . .' His skull-mouth beamed at her. 'I've heard so much about you from Ed – really, more than is becoming, he's such a gossip – and I'm delighted to announce that you are no less than the exquisite vision conjured up in Edgar's mellifluous – and somewhat interminable – odes to your beauty.'

So, thought Isola, *a particularly charming and verbose stoner.*

'Isola – Saint Philip Sutcliffe, or just plain Pip,' said Edgar, as Pip stood. 'I'm sorry he's an arse. If he bothers you, go tell Jella.'

'I'm not bothering her,' said Pip, looking wounded. 'When do I ever bother people?'

'You're doing it right now. Look, the ring's turned black,' said Edgar, indicating her hand.

Pip considered this for a moment. He scratched his blond chin-scruff. 'Fair point,' he conceded. He turned and pulled a fizzing sparkler out of someone's hand, then put it, lit-end down, into Edgar's beer. Then, like a scruffy magician, he conjured a little paper umbrella from about his person and offered it for Isola's cocktail glass. 'Lovers – adieu.' Pip tipped an imaginary hat at them before vanishing into the blur.

Just before midnight, Saint Pip climbed on the table and lifted his plastic cup of spiked punch.

A Toast by Saint Pip

'Now, it may have been eighteen years since Edgar Llewellyn was last inside a vagina –' a rash of good-natured boos punctuated the crowd '– but as pathetic as that is, he's still cooler than everyone in this room, excluding me!'

More cheers, of course.

The grungy and effortlessly cool Ellie Blythe Nettle appeared bearing a gift of 'a steak instead of a cake', since it was well-known that Mother Poe never allowed meat in the house. Ellie Blythe, with her ginger dreadlocks, constellations of freckles and silver ring in her eyebrow, was cute with a hard edge, like rock candy. To Ellie Blythe it was still the nineties and Kurt Cobain was merely between records, not gravestones. She was also openly lesbian – while her greatest admirer, Grape, was still finding her footing in her fluid sexuality. Now, emboldened by liquor, Grape dissolved into

spasmic giggles when Ellie Blythe twisted a dreadlock in her direction, and almost immediately Isola lost her in the swell of the crowd.

The guests lit a bonfire out back, in the rabbit-burrow hollow, burning wet wood from lemon trees that were never planted. The flames belched blue. Isola hovered tensely over it but the birds burned unnoticed in their shroud. She watched their ashes float upwards and decided cremation was the best thing for them. They belonged to the sky, not the earth.

Drinks were spilling, voices were rising excitedly. Two of Grape's plus-ones, Shinji Honda and Miranda Lenkic, were splitting a slice of the steak cake in a corner and holding hands with faint embarrassment, their mouths too full to kiss. The paint buckets were nicked and Isola couldn't turn a corner without a glowing party guest trying to splatter her with greenish firefly blood, molten-red muscle. It got more difficult to distinguish friends from strangers as the intricate patterns on the guests' bodies melted into techno blurs. A shirtless boy jumped out at her from under the stairs, wearing Beethoven's death mask.

Isola laughed, but the girl behind her shrieked in fright.

'What a *freak*!' snarled the familiar voice.

Isola ducked into the kitchen before Bridget McKayde could recognise her. Saliva was boiling in her mouth. She felt uneasy. Why would Edgar invite a girl like Bridget to his party? He'd never mentioned knowing her. Isola decided to find Grape, to make sure a scene was avoided.

Edgar had his head in the fridge, searching out a particular nectar amongst the endless rows of glass bottles. Isola tapped him on the shoulder and he bumped his head on a shelf.

'Ouch – oh, hi!' Edgar said, rubbing his crown. He smiled, brazenly scooped a few blueberries out of the bottom of her refreshed cocktail glass and popped them in his mouth.

'Have you seen Grape?'

Edgar pointed to his ears. 'What?'

'I said,' yelled Isola, standing on tiptoes to reach his ear, 'have you see Grape?'

'Why?' he shouted back, 'are you bored?'

Someone shut the kitchen door and the music was blunted. A guest standing near the sink cracked open a wine bottle; the cork shot towards

them and Edgar automatically pulled Isola close. The cork missed her by a whisker, pinging into the fridge and shattering a rack of glasses.

‘How can you be bored,’ Edgar went on, as nonchalantly as possible, ‘when I just saved your life? This party is death-defying stuff.’

Wine was pouring in a waterfall from the fridge; Edgar stepped into the fizzy puddle and slipped. This time, Isola caught him, and as he regained his footing, they bumped heads. They laughed and didn’t pull away. There was paint on Edgar’s braces and his grin glowed in the dark. A mouthful of stars.

‘Who just saved *whose* life?’

‘I reckon we’re square,’ replied Edgar.

Still they stood, forehead to forehead, breathing one another in. Edgar reached for her hand, hesitated, then plucked the miniature umbrella from her glass instead.

Isola said, after a moment, ‘I’m getting wine in my shoes.’

‘Me too.’

He tucked the paper umbrella behind her ear, the brief brush of his fingers still cold from rummaging through the fridge. And then it didn’t matter that she’d found Bridget but couldn’t find Grape – Isola was with Edgar on his birthday, both of them glowing in the dark, and she hadn’t bought him a present.

The Clock Strikes Midnight

‘Happy eighteenth birthday, Edgar Allan Poe.’

‘Stretch Out and Wait’ by The Smiths had come dulled on the stereo, a song meant for slow-dancing, for lying in lavender fields.

Edgar scoffed. ‘Edgar Allan Poe is like, two hundred years –’

She stoppered his mouth with hers, and it was gloriously unexpected. Her lips were frosted with sugar and faeriedust. Through his transparent eyelids he thought he saw the neon marks on their arms and chest lift right from their bodies and encircle them, revolving like wedding bands, the broken dust satellites after two planets clash, after the centre of gravity shifts.

His pulse throbbed in his throat, a jellyfish sting, and he pulled her closer into the collision kiss. He smelt a dizzying perfume miasma and heard sparks and the buckling of glass – Cinderella’s façade, her ballgown, was cracking at the hem and along her waist, where Edgar’s hand lightly rested. Not a ballgown, he soon realised, but a bell jar – the invisible glass that kept her sealed within and everyone else out.

She jerked away as though she’d been bitten. He looked at her and surreptitiously tongued his teeth, praying she hadn’t scratched herself on his silver braces.

She blushed and murmured, ‘I love this song.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ said Edgar. He’d heard her playing The Smiths before and promptly downloaded the discography.

Blushing again, she rubbed at her lipsticked mouth with the back of her hand. ‘So, um, *have* you seen Grape?’

‘She’s probably with Pip,’ he said as the memory resurfaced somewhere in the back of his mind. ‘He said he was forming a wolf pack, or something just as mad, and he led a bunch of idiots off into Viv’s –’

Isola ripped out of his embrace. ‘They WHAT?’

The cocktail glass dropped from her limp fingers, and someone behind her yelled out, ‘Taxi!’

But neither of them laughed. Isola was furious.

No Trail of Breadcrumbs

‘Are you kidding, Edgar? You promised!’ she shrieked, and she shoved her way through the crowd, knocking past a boy who spilled his drink over Bridget, who in turn threw her drink in his poor oblivious face.

Isola didn’t stop. The blur of luminous bodies wove around her. She barrelled past the people in the hallway; a hat stand was knocked over, a lamp smashed.

The cold air bulldozed her as she left Number Thirty-seven, her heels sinking into the lawn as she sprinted into the night.

‘Isola! Hold up!’ Edgar called from the doorway.

‘You promised, Edgar!’ Her voice bounced off the outer trees that formed the great wall between Aurora Court and Vivien’s Wood, between Isola Wilde’s rapidly darkening universe and the claustrophobic, always-getting-smaller world of Everyone Else.

Why had she kissed him? What was she thinking? Because it had been *her* – *she* had initiated it, and his mouth had formed a waiting answer against the sudden question of her kiss. And then Morrissey’s voice had warped; the music slowed and the scene turned burnt sepia and flickering, a piece of damaged film, and echoing in the back of her mind, a voice, an awful broken voice issuing from a bloodied mouth . . .

‘*He deserves better than a dead girl, Isola Wilde . . .*’

Isola had gasped against his teeth and broken away, and now she was crashing through the undergrowth, rabbits and foxes scattering like teenage lovers spotlighted by police. She could see plumes of light ghosting distantly between trees. At first she thought they were faeries, but the lights flickered, and she realised: Pip’s idiot wolf pack had carried flaming branches from the bonfire to light their way.

She ran towards the lights, but they split apart, beacons in all directions – her inner compass was liquor-flooded, and the needle spun. She pressed her

hands to a nearby tree and asked it for directions, but it seemed as disorientated as her – in fact, its voice was so quiet, she could barely hear it over the pounding of her own heart.

Maybe Florence was right.

'Isola! Isola!'

A pink diamond catapulted towards her; Isola tried to explain what had happened, but the stitch in her side seemed to have sewn up her lips, too. She wheezed breathlessly, but Rosekin understood nevertheless.

The faerie's wings trembled excitedly. Rosekin had always adored a drama. 'Follow me, princess! I'll guide the way!'

Isola chased Rosekin instead of the darts of flame. Wicked tree roots went out of their way to snag her ankles and the high hem of her tragic wedding dress – why was the forest acting like this? Were the trees angry with her? Did they think, as Isola sometimes did, that she had provoked the mad girl ghost? Florence was somewhere out here, and while Isola had worried about herself and her neighbours, her six older brothers, she'd never stopped to think what effect a spirit like that could be having on the woods.

She ran on, through the soup of eyes watching, unblinking. The starless night hung indifferent above her, and Rosekin streaked too far ahead, leaving Isola to feel her way through the dark, panic crippling the map in her memory, which threw up roadblocks, misnamed avenues and occasional flickers of flame, at first far away and then seemingly right beside her in the trees.

Isola took her shoes off and ran, alien-bright, through the woods she knew and loved and now feared.

Figures streaked wildly up ahead. Torchlight and burning branches, and glowing splashes on forearms and feet, painted shadow-tribes. Isola felt dizzy.

Then an electric-pink shriek.

'*Go back, Isola! Go back!*'

'What?' Isola skidded to a stop. 'Rosekin?'

Up ahead she heard Grape's obnoxiously loud laugh, Jella calling someone *sweetpea* and *sugardoll*. She heard Pip yelling tipsily, his voice spiralling between the trees, 'I've seen *The Blair Witch Project*, I know what happens next!' to clouds of laughter from the others. Ellie Blythe started whistling a melody of horror movie themes. Isola stumbled on.

Rosekin's pink glow had vanished – only the voices guided her now, and even they were fading again.

'Through here, through here!' Rosekin called encouragingly in her bell-voice. 'I've found them – Isola, hurry!'

Exhaling at last, Isola burst through the trees and found it, her quarry – a flaming branch. But it had been abandoned, wedged upright in the earth at the centre of a mushroom ring.

No Grape. No Rosekin. Not even Florence.

Isola stood in the Devil's Tea Party.

Sinister giggles echoed from outside the circle and Isola spun on the spot. The leaves didn't crackle beneath her. She lifted her foot.

Feathers.

Glossy-like angel feathers, black and grey and brindle-spotted. The feathers of hundreds of birds plucked bald and abandoned, the inedible remains of a corpse's dinner.

She held her shoes close to her chest, the sharp heels her only weapon.

'Rosekin?' she called, whirling on the spot. She called again, louder, 'GRAPE? ARE YOU IN HERE? IT'S ISOLA!'

The upright flame munched its insatiable way down the branch. No-one shouted back.

'GRAPE!' yelled Isola, cupping her mouth. 'ROSEKIN!'

The ring of red and white mushrooms cast monstrous shadows behind them in the firelight. Her own shadow elongated, and another . . . a second, oddly-shaped shadow, cast from above . . .

Slowly, she looked up.

Above the Devil's Tea Party, suspended from the canopy, was a long, twisted chain made from the knotted bodies of dead faeries, tied together by their long sharp limbs, limp and lightless. Coloured faeriedust trickled off them like skin cells.

Hanging suspended at the end of the fae-rope was the missing white birdcage and, inside it, crushed, was Grandpa Furlong's mandolin, and a faerie-sized daisy-petal dress.

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘The second dragon,’ said Mother, ‘was Treachery.’

‘In the dead of the night, while the others slept, the fifth prince sat and watched the moon climb a ladder of stars, thinking only of his sister and whether the moon she watched was the same. On the wind, the second dragon came to him, and offered a golden claw, whispering in its ancient voice, “Trust me, for I am not like my brothers, and I want to help. I will take you to your sister.”

‘Trustworthiness was the second prince’s greatest virtue, and also his flaw. The prince who kept all his sister’s secrets like charms on a necklace chose to trust the second dragon. Without waking his brothers, he climbed upon the dragon’s back, and never kept a secret again in this world.’

Isola Intensive

The young female patient presented at Avalon Charity Hospital early the next morning, suffering dehydration and some degree of confusion.

She'd spent the night alone in Vivien's Wood.

Her father had found her. 'She didn't come home,' he'd said, looking confused. 'I woke up and she wasn't in her room, and I just knew.'

The nurses tilted her bed and plucked at the tubes that pierced her arms, saying in kind voices, *you can tell me, dear, I won't blame you if you did take something you perhaps shouldn't have – some kind of pill, maybe? – and you just didn't want to say so in front of the doctor.*

The was a memorial picture of Mama Sinclair on the wall. Isola felt like one of the wan, fey girls in the bloodletting wing from a history book she had once read, pierced through by chainsaw-leech jaws, staring dully at the ceiling as she was devoured alive.

Although there was nothing left in her system, the hospital recorded the incident as a suspected drink-spiking, exacerbated by cold temperatures and dehydration.

Isola was propped up in a bed with an IV drip in her arm. A short, bespectacled Indian man thumbed through the clipboard at the end of the bed.

'Apparently, Isola,' said the doctor mildly, not looking up from the notes, 'you told a nurse that your name was Florence?'

Isola shrugged at him. Dr Aziz. Her mother's doctor.

'You also told her you got lost in the woods – despite being a frequenter of the area, according to your father – because you forgot to leave a trail of breadcrumbs behind you?'

Isola thought of Jamie's never-fail excuse. 'I've got a black sense of humour,' she replied.

Dr Aziz eyed her curiously. ‘I haven’t seen you down at the practice for some time,’ he said abruptly. ‘I’m glad, though – you never want to see a face too often in my line of work. I hope you’re keeping well. But you look pale. How have you been sleeping?’

Dr Aziz was a good doctor. His bedside manner was textbook perfect; he’d always breathed on the stethoscope before ice-bolting it to her back, and he’d promised he’d never broken a needle off in anyone’s skin.

But he had not fixed Mother Wilde.

‘Sleep is for the wicked,’ said Isola automatically. She laughed, and squeezed the tube of the IV drip, hoping to pump the liquid through faster so that she’d be on her way sooner.

‘I’ve been getting a bit less than usual. Home troubles,’ she added meaningfully, hoping he’d attribute her demeanour to the stress of dealing with Mother and not with a haunting. From what she remembered, she’d only been in the Devil’s Tea Party for a few minutes, and had stepped out to find it was dawn, and she was turning blue, with thorns in her skirt-hem and wet bones, and she hadn’t the strength to move until Father had come to rescue her.

When the saline bag had drained, Dr Aziz slid the needle from the puckered vein and told her that Father had returned to work and could be reached on his mobile when she needed to be picked up. He put a cartoonish band-aid over the leaky pinhole in her elbow crook, admonishing her kindly, ‘Drinking and the wilderness never mix, Miss Wilde.’ On his way out he left the card for his private practice on her bedside table. An invitation. An unsaid word of concern.

Officially discharged, Isola went downstairs and made the call she’d been dreading.

❄

A faded red car with a painted moustache on the bonnet rolled into the ambulance zone and double-parked. James kicked the passenger door open – the outer handle was still broken. Isola got in.

The previous summer, James had left CDs on the dash and they’d melted in the scorching sun like Dali’s dripping clocks. He liked the way the mess looked now, a little work of absurdist art on Pepito’s ashtray altar. Isola

watched the tiny rainbows reflecting in the window, studiously avoiding James's gaze.

'So,' he finally said, his bitten fingernails tapping his heartbeat out on the steering wheel. The rhythm was a little too fast. 'Eventful night.'

'Yeah, you should have come.'

'Why? To keep *you* out of trouble?' said James, firing up at once.

'No,' said Isola quietly, leaning her aching head against the window. 'To get in trouble *with* me.'

Her party outfit was stained with patches of dirt like money pinned to a Greek bride. Pale paint splatters on her forearms disguised the puncture bites of blood drawn out for testing. The soles of her glittering red heels were now eternally wine-scented.

She propped her feet up on the dash and wondered whether Dorothy ever admired her pale ankles in the same way, sheathed in starry blood, or whether she'd imagined the feet of the dead witch who'd owned the shoes first. Dead witch heels, that's what she was wearing. Not like Cinderella's at all. And Glinda was no fairy godmother.

'Where'd you get those?' James pointed to her knees. Mirroring bruises ringed them, like age lines in a tree trunk.

'Dunno.' Isola tugged at the hem of her dress, placing her hands over her knees. 'Last night, I guess.'

While James watched the road, Isola inspected her legs. She poked the markings, which ached and turned yellow at her touch. Fresh black bruises ran all the way around.

Like a single stripe in a pair of stockings.

❄

Alejandro was beside himself.

'*I lost my sisters!*' he roared. 'And by the grace of Nimue, I will *not* lose you too!'

Her face hot with furious tears, Isola stormed outside. She wasn't even sure who or what she was angry at – Father's distance or Grape's irresponsibility or Alejandro's tone.

She threw Dr Aziz's business card over the plum tree's shallow grave.

Text: An Interlude

ISOLA ISOLA ISOLA ISOLA ISOLA ISOLA ISOLA

~

WHERE DID U DISAPPEAR OFF 2 LAST NITE?

~

CMON BABE I HAVE FUNNY STORIES 2 TELL U

~

I JUST SPOKE TO JAMIE AND HE SAID U WERE IN HOSPITAL???

~

ISOLA WHAT HAPPENED???? ☹

~

PLEASE ANSWER UR PHONE ☹

~

I TRIED U GUYS AT HOME, I GUESS NOBODY'S THERE. PLEASE LET ME KNO UR OK SWEETIE

~

R U OK?

Edgar the Ripper

Father had left a scrawled note, his handwriting closer to a bear's than a worried parent's: *I am very disappointed in you.*

That night Father came home in a towering rage.

She heard a few people knock on the door, but his gruff voice would echo, garbled, up the stairs – clearly, she wasn't allowed visitors. Isola saw Grape, then Ellie Blythe, Pip and Jella arriving together. Edgar visited too. His mother, Lotus Blossom, brought a covered up casserole dish, which Father accepted, but she too was turned away fairly quickly.

Edgar was the only one who thought to glance up at Isola's window. She waved tentatively. He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and pointed at it. She shook her head – Father had confiscated hers, claiming she needed sleep, not distractions, although she recognised it as a punishment, too.

It was dusk when Edgar contacted her.

She was hanging backwards off her bed, reading Brontë upside-down, when the flickering of his bedroom light caught the corner of her eye.

Letting her body slide off the bed and coil gently on the floor, Isola went to the window, hesitant at first, before throwing it wide. At once there was the sound of steel unsheathing and Ruslana appeared, her midnight-cloak swirling around her as she assumed a defensive stance beside Isola.

All was silent.

'Isola,' said Ruslana urgently. 'What is it? What did you see?'

'Nothing, yet,' Isola replied, narrowing her eyes as Edgar's light strobed frantically then flashed off. A sudden sound filled the night sky, a metallic whirring, and she spotted the dark silhouette of Cassio's remote-controlled helicopter hovering over Number Thirty-seven's satellite dish.

Isola gave a snort of laughter then covered her mouth; it would not do for Father to check on her now, not while the toy helicopter was floating

drunkenly towards her window. A small package swung perilously beneath it.

Although obviously aiming for her window, the toy lurched upwards and landed on the roof. Ruslana went up to retrieve it as the darkness gathered, while Isola looked intently for the pilot. All the curtains of the Poe house were closed, however, and Edgar was nowhere in sight.

Ruslana brought the battered helicopter to Isola, who quickly untied the small package. Inside was a small, creased sketch of her – the bright, streaky face of pastel paints let her know it was based on her appearance at Edgar's party the night prior.

There was also a short note.

Hey you!
How are you feeling? Believe it or not, Pip and I actually managed to clean most of the place up – and hid the broken stuff in the yard – so the 'rents weren't too cranky when they came back from my nan's this afternoon. But when Grape called and told us what had happened to you, Mum FLIPPED. She says I'm never allowed to have a birthday again, which means I'm stuck at 18 forever, I guess???

Anyway, I really hope you're feeling better, and I'm sorry I'm a complete moron. I tried to visit, but now I just think your dad wants to kill me. Maybe I'll send him a drawing too. I didn't get the best look at his face, but I assume he's just you with a beard, right?
– E. A. P.

P.S. I hope you like the bracelet! I thought it might make you feel better, especially if you got one today that matches. You can wear them like warrior wristbands or something. I have, like, a hundred so I won't miss it.

Inside the envelope Isola found a slim, plastic hospital bracelet; Edgar's name was printed on it, along with his birthday and date of admission. It was from the year before, at the Our Lady of Immortal Heart Hospital.

'Must be from his transplant operation,' she said wonderingly, buckling the indentification tag around her left wrist.

Ruslana smiled at that. The Fury was serious and stoic and rarely smiled, but when she did it was stunning, a wonder of the world.

Isola played with the hospital bracelet as she described to Ruslana the feeling that overcame her.

‘I don’t know what made me do it. I mean, did I *want* to kiss him? Do I still want to? Was it because I’d been drinking or I was still upset about *her* and those birds and I wanted comfort?’ She hesitated, wondering if she’d sound mad, like Mother, if she went on . . . But she could tell Ruslana; the Fury would not laugh. ‘But it felt like . . . like I heard her, in my head.’

‘Heard who?’

‘Florence. I’m worried that she’s . . .’

Ruslana fingered her jewelled scabbard and sat on the end of Isola’s bed. ‘Don’t waste an ounce of worry on that monster,’ she growled. ‘She may have got through old man Furlong and Rosie, but she won’t get past me.’ A muscle in her cheek worked furiously, as though she were trying not to cry.

Isola reached out to gently stroke the Fury’s long black hair. She knew why Ruslana treasured Rosekin and her kind – tiny creatures who came from an all-female race, who never had to worry about death at the hands of their men. To protect was Ruslana’s natural instinct, and it betrayed her compassionate nature, which was hidden so carefully in her stoicism.

Ruslana turned her face away, and Isola respectfully averted her eyes, letting the Fury regain her emotional equilibrium. She traced the ringed bruising on her knee that she’d noticed earlier and frowned. How could she explain? Florence hadn’t been near her . . . Florence had been *inside* her . . .

‘Was it a good kiss?’

Isola sighed. ‘Wonderful.’

‘That boy’s Jack the Ripper, baby.’ Isola looked sideways at her, nonplussed, and Ruslana tapped her innocently on the nose. ‘It means he’ll take your heart.’

Isola nodded, looking back to the small sketch the boy across the street had made. A glitter-crusted lock of hair fell over her face and she shook her head, trying to dislodge the pink sparkles.

‘Hold on, princess.’ Ruslana steadied her head, her breath caught on the sharp edges of her lips. ‘Rosekin.’

‘What? Where?’ Isola craned her head, looking about the room for the familiar pink bubble.

Ruslana brushed her long nails through Isola's ringlets, collecting a smattering of electric-pink dust. 'This is Rosekin's faeriedust,' she said in a low voice as she opened her palm for Isola to inspect. 'I'd recognise her shade anywhere.'

Her razor lips were shaking now; Isola pretended not to notice. 'They never give their dust to anyone, not even Nimue children like you. It's said to have the power to heal the good and kill the wicked.' Ruslana rubbed the tiny amount of dust into Isola's hands before clamping them closed. 'Use it wisely, princess.'

Sex, Drugs and Grape Tomoyaki

Father was still home when Isola went downstairs for breakfast. Surprisingly, he'd made a bowl of sweetened porridge, and he nudged it towards her as she flopped tiredly into her seat.

'Are you sure you're right to go to school?' he asked gruffly, scrubbing at his whiskery cheek. 'It's all right, if you don't wanna . . .'

Isola avoided his gaze. 'I'm fine, Dad. The doctor just said I got a bit dehydrated –'

'You could have called me.'

'It's all right, James was in the area and I didn't want to –'

'Not just for that, Isola. When you get lost or, you know, if you're worried about your friends doing something stupid – even if I'm just across the street, or on the other side of town, or asleep, or whatever . . . Well, you call me.'

Isola stirred a teaspoon of sugar through her porridge, blushing into her orange juice. 'Thanks, Dad.'

He waited for her to finish eating, then cleared his throat noisily. His keys were jangling about his knuckles. 'Come on. I'll drive. That wood's looking a bit . . . rotten.'

She opened her mouth to argue – where was this sudden burst of protectiveness coming from? – but closed it abruptly, knowing that, with everything that had been happening in Vivien's Wood, it wasn't safe for her, even during the day, with brother-princes by her side.

❄

Grape was waiting by Isola's locker, her eyes wide and nervous as she scanned the corridors for her approaching friend. Isola had already spotted

her and slunk up behind a thicket of blue dresses; for some reason, she felt nervous, and also, strangely angry.

‘Hey, Grape,’ said Isola softly, and Grape jumped in fright.

‘Isola! Hey! Are you okay? What happened to you? Why haven’t you answered your phone?’

‘Got confiscated,’ she said vaguely, twirling her combination lock. Father had returned her phone the night before, and Isola had been flooded with her best friend’s worry. But Isola hadn’t replied, and she still wasn’t sure why.

‘Oh Sola, I tried to visit you – Jamie called me, and he was really shocked that I didn’t already know what had happened. And I’m so sorry, I know you went in after us, but we were just having a bit of fun and we didn’t get lost, I never thought *you* would . . . I mean, you practically *live* there, it’s insane that you’d get . . . and I know I’ve been a shite friend, I had too much to drink and I didn’t even realise – oh, I’m sorry!’

Isola had felt a freezing sensation run rat-like up her spine at Grape’s use of the word ‘insane’. ‘You’re sorry,’ she repeated, in a strangely icy voice. Grape looked confused, and still worried, chewing her lower lip. ‘Sorry for almost getting *yourself* killed, or *me*?’

Grape looked horrified and Isola felt her cheeks reddening like bitten apples – how could she explain the utter helplessness she had felt when the party wolfpack had disappeared into Vivien’s Wood? How could she redirect the rage she felt, not at Grape, not really, but at herself for letting this happen?

Grape had put herself in incredible danger and Isola couldn’t even tell her *why.*

And wasn’t it *her* fault, really, for disturbing the corpse, for attracting its mindless wrath? Wherever Isola went she brought danger. Edgar had been safer under the power station, in his old home on the other side of the valley, yellowing as his kidney failed, where Isola couldn’t reach and taint him . . .

‘I *told* you to stay out of the damn woods!’

Isola was yelling now; girls bustling past had slowed, rubbernecking at the unfolding drama, and Grape looked steadily sicker while Isola felt something small and warm and Grape-coloured inside her turn to ice.

‘Isola, please, listen. Edgar called me yesterday – he couldn’t get in touch with you, he was worried! And –’ Grape seemed to falter then steel herself, lifting her chin slightly. ‘I am, too. But please, Isola, I’m so, *so* sorry I didn’t notice you missing, but please stop yelling, everyone’s staring and you’re getting hysterical –’

Hysterical: psychologically unwell, from ‘hystericus’. Latin for ‘of the womb’.

Because lunacy and *la feminine* always seemed to go hand in hand.

Isola saw red.

‘I am NOT!’ shouted Isola. ‘I’M NOT LIKE MY MOTHER!’

‘What, I never said . . . Isola, wait!’

❄

Sitting alone in conservative Sex Ed class, it was more difficult than usual to concentrate on the sterile and mechanical depiction of women as baby machines, of sex as a function and not a desire. Girls whispered behind her. They knew Isola had spent Saturday morning in hospital. No more than that, of course, but still they bounced around phrases like ‘stomach pumped’ and ‘completely drunk’ and ‘slut’ and ‘freak’.

‘I heard she slept with the birthday boy,’ snickered one girl.

‘Probably couldn’t think of a better present,’ replied another.

‘Or a cheaper one,’ added Bridget snidely, and the wicked giggles peppered Isola like spitballs lodging in her hair. Her legs were aching too, and she knew that if she lifted her dress, she’d find more bruises circling around her legs; another set of black stripes.

Mother Wilde’s Lock and Key

Father took her to and from school every day after that.

Isola leaned her cheek against the glass as they drove down the gravelly road, glimpsing the forest – *my forest,* she thought furiously – as a tangled, deadly thing. Father had not banned her outright from entering it, but without her twice-daily hike through Vivien’s Wood the gloaming domain felt less under her control – wild, not *Wilde* – and she shifted in the car seat, fiddling with the radio station, wondering whether this strange feeling could constitute fear.

❄

One evening, Mother had left a note, composed entirely of ransom-letters cut out from the newspaper.

Gone to church. Be back later. Love you – Mum.

‘Dad, do we have a church?’

‘Yes, Roman Catholic,’ growled Father, picking cornflakes out of his beard. Another of his here’s-one-I-prepared-earlier dinners.

‘I mean, a church we go to.’

He coughed into his coffee mug, shook his head. Burnt bean-flakes rose to the surface like fish food.

‘What about Mum?’

‘She was raised in it, I guess. Her Ma was pretty religious. Said she’d never speak to us again if we didn’t get you baptised.’

This was the same grandmother who envisioned a conservative world but gave up on her earthbound dreams when she got *Do Not Resuscitate* tattooed across her sagging chest.

What Mother Asked Father (and Isola Overheard) When the Death Anniversary Rolled Around Again

‘Do you think that’s a type of suicide? Not choosing to finish, just . . . choosing not to continue.’

She exchanged a meaningful look with her own reflection in her teacup. Isola didn’t think it would work so soon. Only the night before, a tearful Mother had reclined on the lounge in one of her best dresses, drinking wine the colour of the River Seine. Sometimes Mother got theatrical when she was depressed. She had fingered the rim as though she was waiting for Madame Guillotine to fall; the crystal had warbled, angel-voiced. Isola had laced Mother’s next glass with the thimbleful of faeriedust Rosekin had sprinkled on her.

Suddenly joining a church may not have been Isola’s initial idea of the first step on the road to wellbeing, but at least things were changing.

Already, it seemed, things were healing.

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Mother, buttoned in a coat with the pink pinch of cold in her cheeks, announced her arrival with a ceremonial slamming of the front door.

‘Mum!’ said Isola, and though she’d practised the exclamation all evening, she couldn’t keep the shock from her voice. ‘Where’d you go?’

‘Didn’t you get my note?’

‘Yes, and it made me assume you’d been kidnapped!’

Mother deposited her handbag on the couch and unravelled her scarf one-handedly. ‘Well, I went of my own free will, baby. It’s a little church near your school that I thought sounded interesting – I read about it online.’

The bag toppled off the couch and its contents rolled out – lipstick tubes, a tabloid magazine, a pamphlet for weekly group meetings.

It had been an ocean of blue moons since Mother had last ventured past the rosebushes. Too long for these sudden things – for make-up and celebrity gossip and a shiny new interest.

Isola narrowed her eyes suspiciously. ‘Was there a seedy-looking club next door? And a stupid sign out front?’

Mother actually laughed, then lassoed Isola in the scarf and planted a kiss in her dimple. ‘It’s all right, Sola. I haven’t joined any mad cults. It was just a nice cup of tea with some new faces.’

Isola snuck the pamphlet upstairs. Alejandro read it over her shoulder.

Possession and Other Spiritual Ills
What Your Doctor Doesn’t Tell You About Mental Health
And What Our Church DOES

The insignia heading the pamphlet was a red heart tattooed with a keyhole at its centre: the Church of the Unlocked Heart.

Moon Clue

A few times a week, Isola stole into the High Street florist after school and secretly ripped the heads off tulips. She left them scattered along her windowsill and in the corners of every room and in the attic eaves where mice nested.

But like Grandpa Furlong before her, Rosekin wasn't coming back.

Winsor was hanging around more than usual; she seemed convinced that, if her cousin returned, she'd be back at Number Thirty-six. Isola was pleased the faerie was remaining positive, but unfortunately the circumstances hadn't brought them closer. In fact, Winsor was being more insufferable than usual.

The ringed bruises seemed permanent on Isola's legs now. They didn't bloom yellow-white when she jabbed them anymore, but they still ached like pools of stoppered blood, and every now and then another twin set appeared.

She was striped from the top of her thighs to her knees. She'd resewn the hems of all her shortest skirts.

Now and then, she also felt little sharp pains around her throat. She felt constricted. Like a strangled bird.

'What's that?' asked Christobelle, who was splayed in the tub.

'What?' Isola twisted her neck in the mirror and saw it: a red mark on her collar, shaped like a crescent moon. She rubbed the steam off the mirror and clutched her towel tighter.

Christobelle motioned her closer, and as Isola bent obligingly, she traced the hot banana moon. 'It looks like a kissing bruise.' The mermaid giggled, and Isola pulled away.

'Someone's been kissing the dead birdies then, too,' added Winsor, who had squeezed uninvited under the bathroom door.

Isola chucked her toothbrush, but the faerie dodged it. 'Get out, Winsor!'

‘Only wanted to suggest it. I’ve seen all those birds and rabbits and things, too, Princess Prissy.’ Winsor bared her fangs. ‘Maybe you’ll go the same way.’

‘I said, get out!’ Isola retrieved a fly swat from the bathroom cabinet and waved it menacingly.

Winsor’s green eyes glittered. ‘Maybe that’s why your princes left. Maybe *she’s* getting rid of them to clear a path to *you*!’

‘GO AWAY!’ Isola kicked open the bathroom door, threw the faerie out on a riff of hot steam, and slammed it shut. She blocked the gap under the door with a wet towel and and glared at Christobelle. ‘And thanks for your concern, Belle!’

‘You’re welcome.’ Christobelle nonchalantly flicked her fin in Mother’s freshly made bubblebath. ‘I stopped in on that little pond in Vivien’s Wood, you know,’ she said suddenly.

Isola turned away from the cabinet, her expression shocked. ‘When?’

‘Today. Looks positively awful in there, Isola. Like death.’

‘Don’t say that,’ muttered Isola, turning away. Christobelle had been saying such cruel things of late; Isola wondered if she was angry with her for bringing Florence upon them, like she was at herself.

Isola found what she was looking for – Father’s razor, which she inspected intently. Mother’s initial manic burst of happiness had gone the way of the others; she continued attending weekly meetings, but moved sluggishly upon her return. The few short showers she’d managed to take turned back quickly into long, languid baths, and Isola felt nervous about the next impending breakdown. The short-lived high told her, like an omen, that the low would be harsh.

‘I’m sorry, Isola.’ The mermaid held out her arms, beckoning her closer. ‘Please, come here.’

Isola slipped the razor behind the magic mirror, which made a frowning face in steam at her, as though it had felt the sting of it.

‘Sorry,’ said Isola. She rearranged the bottles in front of it and then went to sit on the rim of the tub.

Christobelle leaned forward and took Isola’s chin in her cold hands. ‘Look at those bright eyes,’ she sighed, her single red eye searching Isola’s face. ‘You know, I used to be beautiful.’

‘You *are* beautiful,’ said Isola, slightly embarrassed as she wriggled free. ‘Now get going, Mum’s coming up any minute.’

The mermaid’s long fingers curled around the slippery rim of the tub, her shell-pink fingernails tapping the ceramic. ‘Isola,’ Christobelle said slowly, letting the beats drop in dollops from her tongue.

‘*Christobelle*,’ mimicked Isola, rolling her eyes. ‘C’mon, I haven’t got time for this.’

The mermaid reached out and gently brushed Isola’s hair back. Her red eye was huge and unblinking. She smiled, and said her name again.

‘I

so

la.’

Bullet-quick, Christobelle seized Isola and slammed her into the bathtub, flipping and pinning her to the bottom with all her cold weight.

Isola opened her eyes underwater and panicked. She lashed out with her knees, her elbows, her nails; she fumbled for the surface, but the water ceiling didn’t break. She seized a fistful of Christobelle’s hair, and the red mass immediately reacted, weaving itself around Isola’s throat. She tried to scream for Alejandro and the word came garbled. She thrashed and the bathwater sloshed, but she couldn’t break the mermaid’s grip. Now her mouth was full of seaweedy red hair, which snaked down her throat towards her lungs . . .

Finally Isola’s nails caught the heart-shaped shell over Christobelle’s missing eye; she prised it off. Through the soapy water Isola saw the looming hollow, the place where Christobelle’s beloved sailor might well have cut out her heart.

Christobelle’s remaining eye blazed wide and redder than fire. Furious, then something else. The mermaid raised her hand, her fingers brushing the gaping hole, and with a look of terrible shock Christobelle wrenched herself away, her weight lifting, and Isola followed. The bathwater roiled tsunami-like and Isola vomited water over the tiles. She crouched in the shallow end, gasping for air.

Feeling a hand on her shoulder, hearing a whispered, ‘Princess, I’m so sorry,’ Isola lashed out, shoving Christobelle away. The mermaid dissolved into instant bubbles as Isola’s palms hit the bottom of the tub and the bathroom door swung open.

‘Oh, you’ve run my bath, thank you,’ said Mother in a tired voice. ‘But – oh, Isola! What happened?’

‘I fell,’ she choked out, unable to resist sweeping her hands through the water, as though checking to see whether the mermaid had hidden herself in the shallows. Shakily, she climbed out of the tub.

Mother kissed her hair. ‘Silly thing,’ she said, unable to distinguish between the bathwater and the tears that flowed hot and unchecked down her daughter’s cheeks.

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Summons didn’t work. Like Grandpa Furlong and Rosekin before her, Christobelle didn’t answer the one call that always got through – her name. Isola, a towel wrapped over her wet clothes, still shaking with the fear of their last encounter – and the fear there’d never be another – called her name in every room of the house. She turned on all the taps and plugged every sink, trekking endless wet footprints, and still the mermaid did not answer.

Isola called the only person she could.

She tumbled from the car before James had even killed the engine and ran down the dunes, kicking up whirlwinds of sand, stubbing her toes on broken shells and the burnt-out campfires left by drunks and partying teenagers.

‘CHRISTOBELLE! COME BACK!’

Isola ran along the dark beach, cupping her hands around her mouth, shouting to her fourth prince: ‘BELLE! PLEASE! I’M SORRY! COME BACK!’

Only the west wind answered, and maybe a whale somewhere, a creaking shipwreck, a skeleton bolted to the floor of an underwater cave.

James sought Isola out in the rock pools, where she stood knee-deep in water, clutching the hem of her dress. Luminescent jellyfish bobbed past in a night-time parade. He pulled a pack from the inner lining of his jacket. His fingers danced over the cigarettes in their casket, and each stick quivered from the sudden gust of cold air and fear of their impending demise. Selecting the lucky sacrifice, he struck a match and martyred it between frozen lips.

‘Did you lose something?’ he muttered, and it was so true Isola burst into tears, and James didn’t hug her, his eyes instead on his cigarette’s lit tip, as though wary of burning her if he got any closer.

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘The third dragon was Cruelty.’

Fists of rain beat the window, and the foundations of the house shook fitfully.

‘The fifth brother, the kindest, wandered while searching thickets for wildberries, when he came across the third dragon. It was splayed across the field, nursing its foreleg and moaning in pain.’

Lightning knocked out a cloud stone-cold; the night sky was a boxing ring. Mother continued.

‘The dragon begged for assistance in his hour of need. Because of his innate kindness, the prince went cautiously to his aid. He reached out to touch the dragon’s bloodied scales, muttering soothing words, and the prince never did a kind deed again in this world.’

Betrayal

Ruslana and Alejandro eyed each other across the bedroom, tersely listening through the walls, waiting for something to happen – to Isola, to one another, to themselves. The Fury's hand rested constantly on the sword at her waist now, and Alejandro often stared at the walls, as though trying to discern patterns in the ornaments and posters, the strips of naked wall.

'The window was open,' said Alejandro quietly.

Ruslana snapped her head towards him. 'What?'

'That night when Furlong was meant to be watching over her,' Alejandro said, addressing the wall. 'He had already gone, and the window was unlocked and opened just enough for her to get in.'

Ruslana said coldly, 'Then Furlong betrayed us, just like Rosekin and Christobelle did.'

Isola jumped up from the beanbag. 'They didn't!' she yelled. 'They wouldn't do that! I-I don't know how, but she's been *making* them act like that!'

A strange relief flooded her when neither argued back – she felt more reassured that it hadn't been because her beloved princes had acted of their own free will.

The two princes each strode to the centre of the room, regarding the other warily.

'Can I trust you?'

'Only as much as I can trust you.'

'Are you intending to harm her?' asked Alejandro forthrightly.

'I have no intention of allowing *anyone* to lay a hand on her,' growled Ruslana. 'Florence . . . or otherwise.'

They all heard the threat ringing, and although neither had raised their hands or even their voices, Isola leapt between them, hands raised to disperse the seemingly inevitable fight.

In the tense silence, they heard the ghost girl singing in a distorted language, nursery rhymes and curses, her broken voice splattering the front of the house like paint.

Still eyeing each other, Ruslana and Alejandro reached around Isola and shook hands, swift and business-like.

‘I’ll take first watch,’ said Ruslana authoritatively. ‘You go find out *everything* you can about that girl.’

❄

The starry sky stretched over the house, God’s screensaver. Despite Winsor’s appallingly bad behaviour recently – even for *her* – Isola had grudgingly allowed her to sleep in Rosekin’s old nest in the music box. Winsor deigned to wait in Rosekin’s most familiar place for her inevitable return.

As such, it was Winsor who saw it. The faintest pink glittering on the lawn: the feeble sputter of an unwell fairy. It woke the small fairy from her usual dreams of rose-munching; she jumped out of the small nest of feathers and thimbles, and gave a loud, excited squeak.

‘Rosey! Rosey! It’s Rosekin!’

Isola awoke at once; half-surprised she’d even managed to get to sleep in the first place. She staggered upright, hurrying to the window ledge where Winsor perched, and as the words registered, a bubble of warm hope rose up inside her.

‘It’s Rosekin, Isola!’ Winsor yelled, already impatient, and with a great heave, the tiny fairy scraped the window open.

The opening was barely enough for a fairy to squeeze through – but that was all Florence needed.

A pale hand snatched through the gap and knocked Winsor aside with the suddenness of a viper rearing in long grass. It plunged its fang-fingernails deep into Isola’s neck, flooding her with toxins – terror, shock and, oddly, rage.

Isola tried to scream – but the choked sound she made was strangely reminiscent of Florence’s speaking voice as the dead girl hauled herself up the side of the house.

‘Lovely songs he played, that man on the roof.’ Blood foamed around the dead girl’s mouth.

‘Where – is – *he*?’ Isola snarled between gulping breaths.

The girl grabbed a fistful of her hair, trying to pull her over the sill. ‘He’s gone the same way as those little birds that bothered me with their awful songs!’ she shrieked, rabid-eyed. ‘And you will too, you and your horrible heart-music, because you won’t be quiet and you won’t *stay out of my woods!’*

Then a swoop, a slit, a spurt of blood; Ruslana had materialised in the shadows of the bedroom, slashing at the ghost’s forearm with a long crooked dagger. Abruptly released, Isola fell back on the floor; Alejandro was standing over her, and he slammed the window shut, but that didn’t block the noise of the dead girl’s screeches as she scrabbled at the latch, lost her grip and vanished down the wall again.

Ruslana rounded on Winsor.

‘*What were you doing*?’ she snarled, and even Alejandro cringed away at her devastatingly angry voice.

Winsor squeaked and ducked down behind the music box she’d flown to. ‘I just – I thought I saw . . . Rosey was outside –’

‘Rosekin’s dead,’ said Ruslana harshly.

Isola couldn’t help herself – a horrified yelp escaped her, and Alejandro’s arms pulled her close.

‘And you’ll go the same way if you try anything like that again!’

‘Ruslana –’ Alejandro began, but the Fury rounded on him now, shadow-cloak billowing, eyes turning black.

When he didn’t speak, she shifted her gaze to the quivering faerie. ‘Get out,’ she snapped. ‘I can’t stand the sight of you.’

‘But –’

‘GET OUT!’

Winsor hiccupped and sped under the door in a flutter of green faerie-glitter.

All night, the dead girl stood barefoot on the frosted lawn, her nails scraping at the walls, her black-hole mouth wide open as she sang indecipherable lyrics.

Isola curled up on her bed with her hands over her ears, shuddering violently. Alejandro clamped his hands over hers as he whispered Spanish

lullabies. Ruslana stood guard at the window, her dagger raised in tireless hands, blood trickling steadily down the hilt.

Isola didn't think she would manage it, but she slept.

It was nearing dawn, the world blue-rinsed, when she was startled awake by Ruslana's cry.

'NO!'

Once again the window was scraped open; Isola jerked upright; Alejandro had already left her side, and she sprang to the window after him.

What Isola saw on the grass below made her blood turn thick in her veins.

The ghost girl had indeed caught a pink-glowing faerie, pinching her by her cellophane wings. The faerie seemed to flicker feebly, and her glow was almost the colour of Rosekin's – but not quite.

The dead girl smiled up at them, relishing their gazes as she lifted the squealing faerie to her mouth – and bit her in half.

Ruslana began trembling.

'Ruslana, don't!' yelled Isola, but the reaction was immediate. The Fury's whole body shook as her hair snapped free of its braid, whipping around her as if caught in a storm of her supernatural rage. Her cape of swirling dark changed consistency; now it was feathers, and it seemed to flow from her shoulder blades like great black wings. Her talons elongated, and she curled her hands, showing her blood-coloured palms. The whites of her eyes vanished completely into black. She opened her razor-mouth and gave an unearthly howl.

Below, the dead girl had swallowed the whole faerie and was licking blood from her lips. She had triggered this on purpose, Isola was sure, and this was Ruslana at her most Furious – terrible, beautiful, and driven by vengeance, the only emotion she ever felt filled by, the fuel that powered her endless life.

Isola grabbed Ruslana's shaking arm. Alejandro immediately broke her grip, pulling her away from the avenging angel. Ruslana was insensible, screaming bloody murder as she launched herself through the window.

'Alejandro! Get her back!' Isola pleaded.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that Ruslana might not return to her; her eyes mightn't pale and her claws mightn't retract and she might be nothing more than the Fury, and she might scour the globe for

every faint echo of a girl unavenged, forgetting Isola, forgetting what it was to be a brother-prince.

But Alejandro seemed at a loss; they both hurried back to the window, and saw Ruslana crouch, her murderous gaze fixed on the dead girl; the girl merely licked her stained lips again and laughed. ‘Aren’t you supposed to avenge girls like me, Fury?’ she said mockingly. ‘Where were you when *I* was screaming for help?’

Ruslana roared and lunged, forgetting her weapons, using her talons instead. She slashed at the girl, her red hands dripping.

Isola felt coldness like a physical presence, a hand gripping hers, caressing her neck. Part of her thought the girl would run or dissolve in the shadows. Instead the girl took each wound and danced around, laughing all the while. How would they be rid of this dead-caged-witch-girl? How could they kill a ghost?

‘Ruslana!’

‘RUSLANA!’ Alejandro bellowed over Isola’s plaintive cry, and both she and the Fury froze – they’d never heard him shout before. ‘YOU CANNOT LEAVE ISOLA!’

And that was all it took; feathers moulted, wings melted back into the cloak. Ruslana blinked, standing human on the lawn, and the lily-white was there in her eyes again.

But the ghost girl was gone.

True Nature

Vivien's Wood was suffering the same fate as the plum tree and Sylvia Plath before it.

It was a slow and noxious death, the smell of it wafting miles down the valley, making vaporous SOS patterns in the sky.

Ruslana had gone to lick her wounds; Alejandro said she had been embarrassed to lose control like that, especially in front of *her.* Isola, while admittedly a little frightened by the transformation she'd seen in her brother-prince, could never be leery of Ruslana, her willowy warrior, with her stretching, pale legs and secretly soft centre.

After a week, and after quite a bit of wheedling and begging, Alejandro took Isola to the woods. They only managed a few steps in before the thorn thickets grew too thick, and he stood silently while Isola dragged her hands over the forest floor, catching clumps of dead flowers and grass; a cancer patient's chemo-hair. The leaves that had shrivelled in wintertime were unravelling blackened in the spring. Some trees were birthing toxic fruits and berries, and she found more dead rabbits, foam bubbling along their lolling mouths, their babies starved in lonely burrows.

Not one bird sang in the woods these days.

Everywhere were empty nests, rotting beehives. A dead forest.

All because of one dead girl.

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Dame Furlong was in her usual place, curled in the heart of one of the potted rosebushes standing guard by the door. Mother had never got around to planting them – the illness had struck her down before she could, but the plants had thrived in captivity nevertheless.

‘I’m glad you’re still here,’ Isola told Dame Furlong, plopping moodily down on the step. ‘Otherwise I’d start thinking I dreamed Grandpa up entirely.’

Dame Furlong said nothing, as was her way. She twisted in the web, making a sticky-thread ‘?’.

‘Where’s he gone?’ Isola guessed she had said. ‘I don’t know. I’m sorry.’

The spider knitted again, tugging her wiry body this way and that. She revealed a crescent-moon shape.

‘Oh, this?’ Isola rubbed a hand along her neck, over the red mark that had not faded since Christobelle first pointed it out. ‘Just another trick of that dead girl, I hope. Don’t worry about me.’

Dame Furlong peered at her with eight blinking eyes for a long moment. Then, she wove one last symbol – a heart.

‘Thank you. I love you, too.’

Madame Guillotine

Isola had not slept.

‘Don’t you dare move,’ hissed the voice that hung over her in the darkness like a mushroom cloud, rousing her from her semi-conscious slumbering.

‘Ruslana?’

Isola’s blue eyes were reflected in the blade – wide and terrified. The Fury’s coarse black hair tickled her forehead. She could hear her stilted breathing from above.

It didn’t sound much like Ruslana.

The Fury was crouched over Isola, her red palms wrapped resolutely around her dagger’s handle. She was trembling slightly, not from cold or fear, but in the furious way that heralded her shocking transformation. While one hand was plunging the dagger down, the other seemed to be trying to wrench it upwards, and she huffed with the effort she was exerting into the checkmate.

‘Ruslana,’ Isola said again.

‘Princess,’ whispered the Fury, and she was shaking all over now, little eruptions racking her entire body as someone else’s anger fought her loyalty.

Isola raised a hand to shield her face. Ruslana immediately forced the blade nearer, the edge cutting close to Isola’s right eye, hanging Damocles-style, the glinting guillotine.

‘No, no, I won’t, I don’t want to,’ Ruslana moaned, her sweat-slicked grip on the dagger increasing. Her wings were arching high over the bed, and a single black feather fluttered down to rest on Isola’s cheek.

‘I understand,’ whispered Isola, her breath hitching as the blade shivered closer. ‘I know this isn’t your fault.’

The cold steel of the blade's edge bit into the bridge of Isola's nose. The tip aligned with her wide, watery iris.

A tiny gasp of horror – but it wasn't made by Isola. Tears fell thick and fast on Isola's face; trickled into her hair.

'Oh, Isola,' came the whisper.

The dense shadow above her vanished; the weight lifted from the bed.

'What is it, *querida*?' asked Alejandro urgently, two minutes too late. 'Where is Ruslana? Why are you crying?'

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

'The fourth dragon was Anger.

'By now, there were only three princes remaining, and none knew what exactly had befallen their younger brothers, but they were certain that they would not be returning, and they each silently swore to escape their brother's fates.

'They walked closely together, and trod the most well-mapped paths through the rural edge of their kingdom, but as time passed and their quest seemed more futile than before, they began to squabble amongst themselves. They were entering the dragon's domain now, and none were sure which path would be best to take, though each voraciously voiced his own opinion.'

A rocking horse in the corner of Isola's room blinked dolefully whenever she wasn't looking; she narrowed her eyes, trying to catch it out.

'Tiring of the rowing between his passionate oldest brothers, the third prince, the most calm and levelheaded, opted to walk away rather than engage in another pointless argument. This proved his downfall, for while the brothers shouted, they did not hear his cries for help, and the third prince never settled a discussion again in this world.'

Ruslana

The Book of Revelation

Mother Poe's swollen belly was like a watermelon under her pink shirt, ready to split. She was kneeling in the herb garden, coaxing up the early bloomers.

'Hello, Isola,' said Lotus Blossom. 'Would you mind very much if –?' She held out her hand; Isola helped her upright. She wobbled on her feet. Her body seemed to be a protrusion from her belly, rather than the other way round.

'What are you growing, Mrs P – Llewellyn?' asked Isola, almost calling her 'Poe'.

'You mean apart from a baby?' Lotus Blossom flashed a spark of a smile, then pointed down to the earth. 'This'll be basil, and a bit of dill here, and sage, and parsley – oh, *parsley.* That's a sweet name.' Her eyes glazed over, and she wandered back into the house.

Isola stood a moment in the garden, the toxic waste of panic spilling through her. Lotus Blossom was so lovely. Edgar was lucky to have a mother like her. Her huge belly was beautiful, and her perfect family was whole and intact. What would happen to them if Isola didn't figure this out? What would happen to *him*?

She went upstairs to Edgar's room, which had been overtaken with canvases, splattered with dark paint like a crime scene. Edgar was preparing a folio of work for his art final, and Isola elected to sit quietly and watch him thumb paint over his chin as he eyed the canvas with consternation.

Isola flicked through his scattered sketchbooks. Charcoal and paints and chalk and paper-collage. On closer inspection, she decided the Whore didn't look at all like Ruslana. In fact, her face seemed ugly in that mysterious way beauty could be – like a supermodel with dagger-ribs poking through, a flower with poison lacing its sticky nectar.

She lingered on the apocalyptic images. Not drawings to her anymore, but prophecies coming true. As she lay awake every morning, deaf to Alejandro's Spanish comfort, while the red drained out of leukaemia sunrises, she imagined the end of the world. The empty houses on empty roads. Rubble and acid rainstorms. Guillotined tulips, broken musical instruments. A bathtub flooding with black water; a hole in the earth where a tree once grew, now a skylight for the reigning aristocracy of hell. And there, marked by the single candle burning in the window, was the last living girl on the planet, the princess of a dead kingdom alone in her tower.

Kill the Cosmic Circus

'That which you mistake for madness is but an over-acuteness of the senses.'

– Edgar Allan Poe

Isola Interrupted

Mother was watching a purportedly real exorcism on television. A punky girl in a black dress writhed on a stripped bed frame. Her ankles twisted like screws. She tore at her hair. Her eyes rolled up, only slick whiteness visible between the lashes.

‘How exactly is that helping?’ asked Isola, ever the sceptic.

‘They reckon it’s like the flu,’ said Mother, spooning melted ice-cream into her mouth. ‘You’ve got to sweat it out before you get better.’

The hours ticked by, and neither of them went to bed. Isola waited for some kind of signal from Mother, an indication of normalcy – well, as normal as could be for her – but it was not forthcoming.

Mother flicked over to an animal cruelty documentary. Cattle writhed on the abattoir floor. Everything twisted. ‘I know how you feel,’ she breathed when she didn’t think Isola could hear her.

‘You’re getting worse,’ Isola said, trying her hardest not to make it sound like an accusation.

More than ever, Mother was coloured outside the sharp lines of her body; her personality and madness were clumsily sketched crayon-bright around her, so Isola could recognise her in a crowd, could sense her in the dark.

‘I’m sorry, Sola. I’m trying.’

Isola believed her. She rang Dr Aziz.

❄

The appointment was hijacked. Instead of Mother telling the doctor about her own worsening problems, Mother described her worry. She said Isola wasn’t sleeping, that she watched junk television at all hours of the night and read disturbing fairytales, and she had bad dreams that seemed to intrude upon her waking eyes.

If only they were, Isola thought, but she couldn’t say a word aloud. Not there in the sparkling white consultation room, walled in by the hanging certificate frames and the crayon drawings made by grateful healthy children.

Concern oozed from both adults in the room. Worry: that most overpowering perfume. The smell of it on other people – the knowledge that they were worrying themselves over *her* – only made her feel ill.

Dr Aziz in his slow, calming voice said, ‘It’s all right to feel this way, Isola.’ He was probably the most well-spoken person she knew, after Ruslana.

Two weeks earlier, Isola had seen her oldest brother cry. When she’d told him why Ruslana had gone – her vision blurred with the Fury’s tears she couldn’t stand to wipe away – Alejandro had shown fear at last. He’d folded into himself, a star collapsing, and had curled at the foot of her bed.

Fair Bright

‘Thanks for coming over, Jamie.’

He scoffed. ‘You haven’t called me Jamie in six fucking years.’

‘Yeah? Well, you haven’t called in about the same.’

He shrugged. He hid his fingers in his pockets, as if the truth was spelled out in his palms. ‘I’ve been busy.’

She knew he hadn’t, and he still wasn’t pleased with her, but she sensed something in his voice – something melting between them.

‘My place, then? Or you want to go for a wander in Viv’s Wood?’

Nausea swept over her, snakes in her belly, as they both got in the car. ‘No. Away. I’m so tired of it here.’

As Pepito chugged along, James suggested the beach, the local park, The G Spot.

‘No, no, and definitely not,’ Isola replied, sliding down in the passenger seat and putting her feet against the windscreen, tights hiding the bruises from view.

He gave one last suck before spitting the cigarette out the window. ‘Wait – there’s one of those travelling fairs on the other side of town,’ said James. ‘D’you reckon that’d be fun tonight?’

‘Sure. She took a leaden breath, steeled herself to say it. ‘Just as friends, though.’

‘You’re assuming you’re still my friend?’ Surprisingly, he chuckled. ‘Sure. Whatever we are.’

Loose change jangled in James’s pocket, a merry calypso ringing out. They had arrived on the carnival’s last night in town.

Lights blurred even when they were still; long rows of sideshow attractions, all games rigged to win the lesser prizes. Children darted past her legs, shoals of ever-energised fish.

She bought candy floss from a vendor, and stripped hunks off the wad of pink sugar froth. They dissolved on her tongue, as insubstantial as dreams. Sugar coursed with the heat of heroin through her veins. In seconds her neurons felt fully charged, her spine curling to attention. She could almost feel her pupils dilating, packs of blood cells roaming her ropey veins, her muscles and connective tissues, all the gristle and cartilage that made her up. Inside, she was a carnival of gore.

Her heart thumped impatiently against her ribcage. Isola and James got in line for the carousel, and she imagined extracting her heart, finally silencing it, what it would feel like nestled in her palm, a damp bird, a royal ruby.

She could feel eyes on her from some high place but she daren't look up. She already knew.

This was the place.

The fairground where a freckled teenage boy had thrown himself from the top of a luminous Ferris wheel, and Isola's world had been infiltrated by death. An infection, seeping in through a tiny wound, a crack in her skin – what Dr Aziz called a *predisposition.* A family history.

Isola chose a carousel horse that looked vaguely like the leader of the unicorn herd – except last time she'd seen him, when she was nine, he'd been skeletal and starving. Alejandro had promised he was still alive, but not much more than that. She leaned down, wrapped her arms around the cold neck, and squeezed her eyes against the bucking lights like whirling dervishes. Even here, even now, she couldn't escape the Nimues.

Averting her eyes from the shadowy figure looming gothic over the Ferris wheel, she pretended it was like old times.

That night Isola and James lived in delicious pieces – memory broken up like chocolate chunks: rides, slings and carriages and flying compartments, then sideshow games, then they were buying popcorn and toffee apples, then James took her hand and pulled her much too close and Isola couldn't help but pull away.

Isola and James: At Last, a Conversation

'I'm so sorry, James. But . . . I can't. I do like you, of course I like you! You don't understand, I love you so much – you're my brother. You've been like a brother for so long.'

'And that's all I'll ever be.'

‘Jamie –’
‘That’s all, right?’
‘Yes . . . I’m sorry.’
‘Spare me.’

His Endless List of Reasons

The poison spilled from him, words she couldn't bear to hear. That she'd led him on, and she always would. She used him when she wanted comfort and company and was never willing to set any distance, any parameter around herself, and it was her fault, why did she have to be so beautiful, why did she want to hurt him so badly?

Isola didn't interrupt. James was the second prince – a brother, she'd always told him, though he'd never understood the title, the importance of his role in her imagined hierarchy.

She wanted desperately to believe that this was James possessed, like she thought Ruslana and Christobelle and Rosekin and Grandpa Furlong had been before they left her. But he wasn't a Nimue and Florence didn't know him, couldn't harm him. James Sommerwell was influenced by nothing but his own feelings, and he couldn't help it, the same way she couldn't help not loving him back.

James gave a yakuza sneer. 'You're not a real girl.' He flicked his cigarette to the dust and stomped out the flame. 'You're an illusion. A ghost of the smart, sweet, *real* girl Isola Wilde could have been.'

'The first Isola,' she muttered.

'No, you! The *only* Isola!'

That set him off again; he was shouting now, and through his open mouth streamed old pains, bats from a gaping cave. At once Isola felt weedy hair creeping down the intricate corridors of her lungs, heard a mandolin willingly accompany a broken singing voice.

His face was a murderer's death mask – yet another brother, another switch in loyalties. He would hurt her like the others had with their words and their deeds and sometimes their hands, and she couldn't bear to face it again, couldn't stand to be the princess slaughtered not by dragons but by brothers.

She was lost in the only place she felt at home, a forest she had memorised, and her bruised legs pulsed with blood and her neck burned and her ribs felt as cold as steel and her ears rang from imagined bombs as she flinched away, shouting, ‘No! Please, please don’t hurt me! Don’t kill me!’

Unfamiliar faces circled them, shocked but entranced, like the witnesses to the Boy’s suicide. They could have been the same spectators.

Most shocked of all was James. His fists uncurled and his face said it, in a language he didn’t even speak.

She ran, tearful and blind. She pushed through the line and slammed herself into an empty carriage. As it ascended, accompanied by mechanical groans and the awed exclamations of her fellow passengers, Isola Wilde sat with her eyes squeezed shut. She waited until she reached the top of the Ferris wheel to open them.

As expected, he was sitting opposite her in the cramped carriage. Their knees brushed. He looked concerned.

The Boy’s freckles were darker up close, or maybe his skin was milkier. He had long eyelashes and a grinning line of pimples on his chin. A perfectly normal teenage boy. Not possessed by anything but sadness.

‘Why did you do it?’

The Boy lowered his gaze.

‘Relationship issues?’ Isola hiccuped, repeating the list of reasons discussed at school. ‘Bullies? Problems at home? Brain chemistry?’

She looked down at the earth so far away. The taste of immortality bloomed on her tongue and she downed it; a tequila shot sucked straight from Death’s bones, through those little holes we drill to drink from, those risks taken.

‘Family history? Best friend abandoned you? Boy you love as a brother loves you a little too much? Your princes ran away?’

His eyes were prisons, capturing her, locking them inside together. ‘Didn’t matter why. Not really. Not afterwards.’

Wordlessly, they embraced. Isola and the Boy rode the Ferris wheel, never loosening their hold on each other or mopping up their tears, never looking down.

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘The fifth dragon,’ said Mother in a low voice, ‘was Hatred.’

‘Two princes. That’s all that remained in the party of royal siblings that had set out to rescue the seventh princess. Panic had set in. The second brother was the most loving, and that profound love made him passionate; his passion made him reckless. He was desperate to find his sister and get her home before any more evil befell her and their family. He wanted to travel through the most dangerous lands to save time. The oldest brother, who was steadfast and loyal, declared that they would follow the path set out for them by the King. They argued and shouted, and the second prince, so blinded by his love –’

‘Don’t do it!’ squealed Isola, beseeching the prince in the story.

‘– followed his heart, not his brother, which led him into the jaws of the fifth dragon. The second prince never loved another again in this world.’

Stopped Clock

Isola had never felt more alone. She was cut off from everyone; she couldn't unfreeze herself in Grape's company no matter how hard she tried. She jammed her thumbs under the mask but it wouldn't slip, and she didn't feel like herself anymore.

She avoided Edgar; after what happened with James, she had felt a resurgent desperation to keep him untainted by the wickedness that seemed to follow her, although she knew this new determination would pass; she needed the comfort he offered, and staved off the inevitable trip across the street by clinging to Alejandro, and her room, and the heavy book of fairytales, which almost never left her arms.

Mother, meanwhile, now spent her days in bed, her nights in the bath, and most of her evenings in between at the Church of the Unlocked Heart.

Her church-going didn't seem like the usual concentrated pouring of energy that characterised her manic cycle. Isola suspected she secretly believed that they might have the liquid gold cure hidden somewhere about their church. Scratched around the edges of old coins in the collection plate, perhaps, or frozen in lumps inside the altar candles, or wedged between the confessional doors, or even buried in code amidst the personal revelations of the group therapy sessions.

Isola couldn't begrudge her wishful thinking, but she felt resentful nevertheless. How could Mother not notice Isola's pain, when Isola had spent years tending to hers?

Father didn't even notice when Mother was gone from Number Thirty-six.

They were a household of people, each living alone.

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The inevitable came in March. Returning from the Church, Mother slammed the door a little harder than usual, and threw off her coat with livid gusto.

‘You would not believe the audacity of those people!’ she roared. ‘An *exorcism,* Isola! They tried to perform an *exorcism* on me!’

‘So you could sweat it out?’ said Isola uncertainly.

‘Lunatics!’ Mother went on. ‘I just wanted to try something different – and then this! Oh, Isola, promise me you’ll never get involved with religious nutters, especially if they’re the kind who think a person can be possessed!’

‘You sent me to a Catholic school,’ Isola pointed out, more bemused than ever. ‘And not a modern one, either. That’s *exactly* what they think.’

Springling

Spring brought a floaty sense of *le féminin* to Isola's wardrobe: exposed shoulders, white dresses and braided hair – she played at being a Virgin Suicide with bare feet and filly legs. The short blonde hairs on her upper thighs glimmered in the sunlight. She smelled like peaches and wore bracelets woven from velvet scraps and pebbles she'd surely found long ago on a forest floor.

Spring brought something else, too.

Edgar plopped the plump pink baby in her arms.

'Isola Wilde,' he announced, 'say hello to Puck Vivien Llewellyn.'

Baby Puck stirred himself awake in the cradle of her arms. He poked his tiny fingers through the cuff of his romper suit. His grey-milk eyes struggled to focus on her face, so he blinked sleepily up at the gold ring swinging from her necklace instead.

'Puck's from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Mum reckons Vivien's a boy's name, too,' said Edgar, retrieving a dummy from under the couch. 'I reckon they're getting weirder, personally.'

Isola didn't say anything. She stared down at the baby in something resembling shock.

Edgar surpressed a sigh, feeling frustrated, and then felt guilty for feeling frustrated. Sometimes, talking to Isola was like speaking aloud to a cemetery; it seemed so many different ears were listening, but no ghost voices answered from beneath the ground.

Something was going on with her, but there was no concrete way for him to help, apart from being kind. At least, that's what Lotus Blossom had said, about their sweet blonde neighbour and women in general, when he confided in her Isola's increasingly distant behaviour.

Said Lotus Blossom

‘Ah, sweetie. If the poets couldn’t unriddle them, then you certainly can’t. Be kind, and keep your ears on offer if she wants to talk. But you can’t draw out the strangeness, Edgar. It’s not a poison.’

An Already Broken Pact

Vivien's Wood looked, if possible, even worse than the last time she'd visited.

Isola had not entered it since the disastrous epilogue to Edgar's birthday party; Father, her princes and her own sense of self-preservation had warned her off.

She had to battle her way through the brambles; she didn't even recognise half the thorns and weeds that had built up such sturdy walls.

Toxic-red flowers had sprouted along the Bridge of Sighs. Isola averted her eyes from the brilliantly red ring of the Devil's Tea Party, unwilling to remember that night she'd spent in it. Worst of all was Vigour Mortis – the eternal tree at the forest's centre was fading fast. Its boughs were bare, and dark, gooey sap seeped through its bark like bloody tears from a churchyard Virgin Mary. The bells Isola had tied to its trunk wouldn't ring if she shook them in her hands.

Spring rambled down the mountain trails and into the valley below, a steady trickle from a perfumed stream of blossoms and warm weather, but it had not come to Vivien's queendom. When Isola had escaped the thicket of woolly undergrowth and was heading back to the house, she heard strange noises behind her. She turned back.

With a great unanimous groaning, the border trees leaned sideways, wrapping their boughs around their neighbours in handshakes and pacts, forming a wall too dense for Isola to pass through.

They'd barricaded her out.

A formal rejection at last.

'It's not my fault!' Isola yelled. 'It's not my fault she's here!'

The Midnight Fountain

She had to get out of the house. Between Mother's turn for the worse and Alejandro's dour mood and the impenetrable woods like an old friend ignoring her phone calls, and an *actual* old friend ignoring her phone calls, and Father working longer shifts than ever, and Florence's singing getting louder, and Grape nervously skirting her gaze – she had to get away.

Grape had tried for so long, and so hard. But she had shied away, fearing being unwanted, and it was like the wolves had circled, bitten in the luna-light, and Grape was a werefriend now, only calling around the full moon. Their conversations were short and mostly consisted of Grape asking if she was all right, if she wanted to *talk* about anything. Isola felt she was disappointing her when she said everything was fine. Grape always looked rejected when they sat together at school.

Nothing was fine. Isola was living skinless. Everything got to her.

But even then, there was Edgar. He sent a text close to midnight, asking her over in all-capital letters. With her hair in wild pigtails, slept on and curly so they looked more like antlers, and wearing a crown of sticky daisies, she went to meet him.

'C'mon, I've got something to show you.' He winked, adding, 'That's not s'posed to sound dirty.'

He'd just got his licence and borrowed his dad's shiny black car, and they sped down High Street. For a moment, she thought he was taking her to The G Spot, and was about to say she didn't have a fake ID and her breasts probably weren't big enough anyway, but they passed by the club, which thumped on its foundations, a fresh vomit stain on its industrial bolted door.

'Sorry, Edgar, I know you like *Harry Potter,* but this ain't wizarding school,' said Isola. 'Saint D's is closed up at night.'

'You're wrong,' said Edgar. 'For one –' he swiftly scaled the wrought-iron fence '– it's fairly easy to get in at night. And two –' he held out his

arms, and she gratefully used him as a stepladder as she followed him over '– I freaking *love Harry Potter*.'

Isola laughed, brushing herself down. 'Breaking and entering. What a date.'

'It's not really – we're not going in, per se. It's more like . . . climbing and strolling.'

He led her up the garden path towards the gothic convent and continually glanced over his shoulder; Orpheus double-checking for his dead bride.

Isola had the distinct feeling he was purposely blocking her view of the school with his bulky frame. 'What is it?' she said, smiling despite her suspicions. 'Why are we here?'

He stopped her in her tracks, put his hands on her shoulders and spun her around, reversing their positions. She could hear the bubbling of the fountain close behind her. 'Remember when you said you hated winter?'

'Because I hate snow.'

'But you'd like it if it was warm?' He grinned smugly. 'I thought, since we didn't get to spend the winter together, I didn't get a chance to change your mind. So . . .'

He spun her around again, revealing the surprise: Sister Marie Benedict's memorial fountain, filled with soap powder, was spewing foam. A palace of bubbles to froth in.

'D'you like it?' He grinned nervously. 'I did *so* much trespassing for you.'

'Warm snow,' said Isola in wonder, cupping a handful of bubbles.

'*And* it smells like lavender, and will probably clean your clothes,' Edgar pointed out, so proud of the fountain, his self-created winter night in April.

Clasping hands, they plunged through the foamy world. They felt their way around blindly until their feet touched stone and they climbed into the fountain.

They made themselves beards of bubbles and tried to have a snowball fight, but the floral-scented froth dissolved in their hands. They laughed and Edgar grabbed Isola's hands and they danced, and she could faintly hear The Smiths' 'There Is A Light That Never Goes Out' playing in his parked car. His smile was so natural and Isola thought he looked like a picture on one of her tarot cards, but she couldn't remember which omen or from which pack or whether it importuned destiny or death.

‘Why are you doing this?’ Her words were like scattered dandelion seeds, white and feathery and searching out updraughts.

‘Doing what?’

She’d stopped dancing, and he stopped laughing. She stood on tiptoes to examine his face.

A boy with monster’s cheekbones and strait-jacket arms. The sort of boy who’d insist on being buried with his lover in a heart-shaped coffin, mummified knee to knee. Romantic even in the face of destruction.

‘Doing what?’ he repeated.

‘Being so good to me. You deserve better than . . .’

‘Than you?’

Isola felt she was teetering on the edge of a black hole, the great unblinking pupil of the universe. She took a deep breath. ‘Than a dead girl.’

Edgar shook his head of curly hair and laughed. ‘What?’

The kiss Edgar had planted on her hand was searing hot. He took the same hand again and touched it to her breast and said loudly, ‘Listen! You hear that?’ He took her other hand and pressed it to his own soaked chest. ‘And that too? You’re alive. We’re alive. Listen.’

‘It’s so loud,’ whispered Isola, and their lips met, and they would have drowned in the springtime snow, she was sure, without each other to breathe in.

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Edgar’s body was flawed and warm and fascinating. Hardly any hair on his ankles, his skate shoes had worn them away. Eczema on the back of his knees. Charcoal under his fingernails. Toenails sloppily painted sea-green by Portia. Chicken pox and falling-off-skateboard scars. An old wound on his abdomen.

‘It was a donation,’ he said softly. ‘Someone died – someone young. Only thirty or so.’

Isola raised her head from where it rested on his bare chest. He’d never mentioned a dead donor. She waited for him to speak.

‘I mean, I was happy when I got the news, obviously. It’s the worst, being on those waiting lists; they’d call in the middle of the night and we’d drive to the hospital, I’d get prepped for surgery, and then the doctors come in to

tell you it’s diseased, or it’s not a match, or it’s gone to someone who’s dying that little bit faster than you.’

Isola traced the scar, imagining her finger as the scalpel, hating the idea of Edgar flush under surgery lights, drugged to dreaming. ‘No wonder you hate hospitals,’ she said softly.

‘Yeah,’ he sighed, tightening his arm around her shoulder. ‘And, like I said, it was so good to finally get the damn kidney, but . . . I still feel bad about it, sometimes,’ he said, with a groan of frustration, struggling to put it all into words. ‘Like I wished that person dead . . .’ He swallowed hard, looking up at the ceiling.

‘And your wish came true,’ Isola finished quietly. She traced the scar again, as though unzipping it, seeing the stranger’s parts inside. ‘But,’ she whispered, ‘aren’t they still alive, in a way? At least, in pieces.’

❄

She got up at dawn and found Mother Poe meditating on a straw mat in the living room. The vibrations of Isola’s stealthy footsteps must have disturbed her Zen, because when Isola made to sneak past her to the hallway, Mother Poe said cheerfully, without opening her eyes or shifting an inch, ‘Sure you don’t want to stay for breakfast, dear?’

A Hearty Breakfast Prepared by Earth Mother Poe

– A strawberry smoothie
– Half a grapefruit
– Oats
– A free lesson in meditation
– A weirdly chilled conversation about the importance of contraception

Mother Poe let Isola hold Puck while she bustled about in the kitchen. Struck silent by the duel distractions of the adorable, wriggly baby and Mother Poe’s (‘Please, just call me Lotus Blossom’) liberal attitude, Isola didn’t bother correcting her impression. She and Edgar hadn’t had sex. She had considered it, but was ultimately content to lie there, examining him shirtless and moon-lit, rather than let him see her bruises, her moon-markings.

Last Man Standing

There it was, her anchor at last – a tenuous happiness, but at least it stuck fast in the current, something she could hold tightly on to, even when Edgar himself was out of reach.

Isola and Edgar talked for hours, about everything. When the baby was sleeping and they had to whisper, when they lay on the floor and watched movies almost muted – even then they were aware of each other. While she braided a strand of her anime heroine-hair, he clogged his mouth with peach slices. Their fingers entwined, and bells tolled in the distant churchyard, startling them apart.

Father's only rule – 'No sleepovers!' – had been steadily upheld since that first night she'd spent curled in his arms. Of course, Father didn't know about that – getting up at the crack of dawn had enabled her to sneak home and sufficiently rumple her bedsheets to foster the belief she'd slept in them.

Isola was too shy to tell Alejandro about her relationship with Edgar. Ruslana and Christobelle would have been so excited to gossip with her, and the thought came with a stomach pang, a pricked nerve in the skin.

Alejandro had begun to go missing again, for long hours. She especially hated when he left at night. They would argue and he would always end up leaving, the air cold in his absence and sometimes still in his presence.

On these nights Alejandro insisted on summoning the only nearby Nimue kin who was even vaguely trustworthy. Winsor pouted the whole night, and Isola didn't feel safer; if she heard about his plans in advance, she'd always stay at Edgar's.

Winsor was a horrible guard, anyway. One night, when Alejandro went to Scotland to speak with the ghosts of druids about exorcising hauntings, Isola caught Winsor trying to swipe a safety pin from the dresser. Winsor wanted to use it as a faerie bayonet, to defend herself against an aggressive

spider, she claimed. Isola was thankful for once that Grandpa Furlong wasn't around – he would be so disappointed in her for not squashing Winsor there and then.

A Brief Excursion into the Conflicted Mind of the Spaniard

'I'm so glad you're back, Ale. Sorry I yelled at you.'

Alejandro, the first and then the last man standing, sat at her bedside and shushed her into silence, fingering the silver buttons on his waistcoat. She had no idea what it cost him to leave her – and what it might cost to stay. He needed a distraction. He tried to mentally drift somewhere as sunny as Spain.

'I really do hate Winsor, though.'

He smiled, and went to watch the window, steeling his mind, awaiting the worst. But at midnight, as his princess finally dozed and Florence whisper-sang on the lawn, his alien hand tugged loose his cravat and looped it round her throat. He watched as Isola was startled awake by the cold silk and the sudden pressure. Her eyes said it all, iridescent in the moonlight.

It took every ounce of love in his blood not to kill her. His hands went limp, and he sank to the floor, and didn't speak until morning. Outside, Florence cackled at the top of her bloodied lungs.

When Isola's eyes had opened and stared straight through him, he was transported to a moment in his past: he lay choking, cold saliva welling up around his pale, bloated pillow-lips. His jerking hands knocked the bottle from its perch, absinthe soaked through his clothes; the girls lifted their skirts from the liquid, hissing in annoyance, while Alejandro drifted away into the Indian silk pillows. Finally he lay unmoving and unblinking, his mouth slightly open, wet and paste-blue. Nobody noticed, not for the longest time.

And time passed around him – those girls were gone, and so were his bones, but still he remained, solid as ever. The house continued to be a haven for people of that kind; the poppy-pipes exchanged for things in little plastic baggies, needlesticks to match their limbs.

How had he ended up dead and rotting in such a place? He had been happy enough; he had loved his sisters but hated himself, for petty reasons

he couldn’t recall. The youngest, browner than their mother and full of cheek, wore ribbons in her hair.

It was decades before he snapped from his stupor. The sound woke him. A strange machine was rushing the walls like the enraged bulls men fought in his homeland. Large metal fork-fingers were peeling back the ceiling and rotted wood was collapsing all around him. Alejandro became aware of the feeling in his limbs again. He blinked, and looked, properly looked, at that thing stretching above, the thing he hadn’t seen in so long – the sky.

And the colour – blue, like a ribbon woven through the black hair of someone small and important. The colour shouted so loudly, louder than the machines. His mouth was so dry, his limbs so stiff. His eyes felt huge and swollen in their eternal unfocused stare.

He sat up, slowly, then stood all at once. There were the ruins, and him, but no remnants of the sinner’s den it had once been, no bones to mark his grave by. Had they come to carry him out? He couldn’t remember. Why had he been there in the first place? The time before the den, the short time where he still felt the cold and warmth and hunger pains – it was hazy, but there was something about three small girls, and something about the smallest one. His fingers curled in muscle memory; in his periphery the visions danced, and he was raking those fingers through brown hair, over a ribbon, blue as the sky. He looked up again, that huge expanse, and remembered Lucía, Jacinta, and his Francesca . . .

It was morning now, in the present moment, and Alejandro found that Isola was still looking at him. Had her eyes always been so blue?

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‘Isola? Please, I would like to talk to you.’

Isola was busy preparing for school; she didn’t look at him. ‘I understand, you know. What happened last night. I know you didn’t mean it.’

‘Thank you.’ His voice caught in his throat. ‘That means . . . a great deal to me. But I would like to discuss something else.’

She yanked a brush through her hair, still refusing eye contact.

‘Are you listening, Isola?’

‘No,’ she snapped. She stomped downstairs and out the door, and he followed in her wake.

‘Pardon?’

It was spattering a light rain. She’d left her umbrella inside, and the rain stained her hair a darker shade of blonde; all her unnatural colours seemed as though they were streaming down her head and curling into the gutters.

‘No, I’m not. Because you’re just going to tell me you’re leaving, too. Don’t try and be a gentleman about it, Ale.’

He ducked down as they passed the grave of the plum tree, and he bundled something in his arms. ‘Believe me, I do not wish for this, and I am not trying to be noble. I am trying to protect you in the only way I –’

She wheeled to face him and saw Alejandro’s cradled arms. There was something fuzzy nestled there, something rain-dappled and deep black.

‘Is – is that a rabbit?’

The creature, which looked mightily like a rabbit, lifted its head, wrinkled its whiskery nose at her and announced, ‘Fooly girl! I is a *gargoyle*.’

Bunny Batman

A gargoyle was rolling on the floor in Isola's bedroom; a slick black oil stain against the pink carpet.

'I have been looking for him for some time now,' explained Alejandro. 'They are a rare species – garden-variety gargoyles. I have heard they like sweets.' Opening the music box, where Isola kept hidden candies, he selected a caramel, unwrapped it and tossed it to the floor.

The creature sniffed at it, stuck out its tiny black tongue for a taste, and then gobbled it up. He rolled on his back and sucked contentedly, his stubby legs in the air.

'What the hell is a garden-variety gargoyle?'

Alejandro cringed at her language. 'It is a Child of Nimue.'

'We is protectors, girly and ghostie,' the gargoyle grunted. 'We is guardians. We keep the bad ones far, far away.'

'Exactly like the stone gargoyles that watch over cathedrals,' Alejandro added. He made to pass her the music box, but she didn't take it. The melody wove through her hair.

Gargoyles on cathedrals, Isola thought. *Like Batman over Gotham.*

'One problem, Alejandro,' she said out loud. 'This is a house, not a church – no matter how much incense I burn.'

He rattled the box. 'I am not asking him to protect the house, Isola. I want him to protect *you*.'

'What from?'

'You know what.'

She tugged the hem of her skirt down and wished her tights weren't so sheer. The bruises were too obvious now: twelve black rings, six on each leg.

'I think you were right about the others being under her control. And I do not believe she wants to kill you,' said Alejandro heavily. 'Rather, I believe

she wants to take your life as her own . . . to possess *you*.'

Stunned into compliance, Isola placed a chunk of watermelon rock candy on the floor by the dark creature.

The gargoyle was fluffy and perfectly rabbit-like, bar his luminous red eyes and solid black teeth, which made him look as if he had a mouthful of licorice. He was still pretty cute, though. The gargoyle couldn't wrap his tiny tongue around the syllables in her name; he repeated after Alejandro until he reached something that sounded like 'Solawile.'

'Just try "Isola",' she said encouragingly. 'Not "Isola Wilde".'

'I–I–Iso–' he muttered, his beady red eyes squinting with effort. 'Too hard. I call girl *little fool.*'

'And I'll call you vermin,' responded Isola, earning her a pointed look from Alejandro. *Be nice,* his eyes said in Spanish.

Alejandro knelt down to give the creature his terms and conditions. 'We shall keep you fed and housed, and in return, I ask that you keep a particular Nimue spirit away from Isola. She is female, in her mid-to-late teens. She has dark hair and wears a black dress. We have been referring to her as Florence for the sake of convenience.'

'Florey the ghostie girl, make stay far away,' grumbled the gargoyle.

The gargoyle's voice was both squeaky and gruff. He sounded bothered all the time, and his English was oddly composed, like a baby Mozart's first banged-out tune.

'Do you have a name?' asked Isola.

He gave her a withering look. '*I* is garden-variety gargoyle, idiot.'

'No, not a species, a *name.* Like how we gave Florence a name.'

'No name. No need.'

'What should I call you, then?'

The little creature puffed out his furry chest. '*Garden-variety gargoyle*!'

'We'll work on the name later,' she said uncertainly. 'Ale, could I have a word with you?'

They went into the bathroom and turned the lock. Isola didn't waste a moment. She folded her arms and demanded, 'What are you planning?'

'To protect you, as I promised.'

'How's he supposed to help?' she hissed. 'He's a bloody bunny!'

'Gargoyle!' yelled the creature in the other room.

‘Remember, Isola, to always be kind to the smallest,’ Alejandro said softly, his voice quivering on the wet tiles. A candle flame flickered in his presence. ‘Everything will be all right. I promise.’

‘So,’ said Isola conversationally when they returned to her bedroom, ‘I was born in the year of the rabbit, you know.’

‘I is *not* a rabbit!’ snarled the gargoyle. ‘Solawile born in year of fool!’

The gargoyle lay on her bedroom floor over the next few days. Isola wasn’t sure what it was supposed to do, and when it would begin doing it. She had taken to simply calling him Bunny, which he couldn’t stand, but which stuck to him, an invisible name-tag.

‘I just want you to try,’ whispered Alejandro while Isola aggressively brushed her teeth. ‘Just *try* to get to know him. And while we are on the subject, I think it is about time you spoke with Grape. She’s clearly concerned for your welfare. She does not mean any harm.’

Isola spat into the sink. ‘All right, all right. Enough with the relationship advice, Saint Pip!’

Chapel Blitz

‘Oh, I’m so sorry about everything,’ Grape was saying with relief. ‘I thought you were *really* upset with me, you seemed so distant. It was like –’

‘Hold on.’ Pink smoke drifted lazily down the corridor, up near the light fixtures. ‘Is the school on fire?’

‘I wish,’ said Grape. ‘Isola?’ she added uncertainly.

Isola only had eyes for the smoke; it wove and spider-webbed, like oil in water. No-one else noticed it. It passed over her head and Isola could smell honey, tar and cherry blossoms.

She could smell Grandpa Furlong’s magic pipe.

Ignoring Grape’s calls, Isola ran and followed the smoke, hardly watching where she was going. Several girls yelled after her as she swerved to avoid collisions, but they passed by with barely a register of hurt; she was immune as long as those strange scents wafted around her head.

‘Grandpa?’ she yelled down the empty chapel, her voice bouncing off the bowed heads of saint statues and eyes-skyward cherub faces. ‘Grandpa Furlong?’

Lit candlesticks dribbled over the altar, and a stone Jesus flexed his abdomen on the cross overlooking the pews. Dusty sunlight beamed coloured spotlights through the high windows. Painted gold stars pinwheeled on the ceiling. Books of psalms and hymns were scattered throughout the wooden pews. There was an air-raid shelter further down the chapel’s aisle – a remnant of the Second World War; an old adage that God offered sanctuary.

The pink smoke trail above was shifting to a bright blue, and despite the silence, excitement bubbled up inside Isola. She knew that pipe like a childhood doll; its shifting colours and smells so different and yet always the same, always recognisable. St Dymphna’s was the one place Alejandro insisted the brothers never go – whatever had happened on Aurora Court

must be preventing Grandpa Furlong from returning there, so this was the next best thing.

The door to the shelter at the rear of the chapel creaked open, exposing stairs that led down into darkness. The pipe smoke drifted up from underground.

‘Grandpa Furlong?’ she called, tentative now.

The cold floor creaked as she took a step forward.

The chapel entrance burst open, and in flew the half-ghost of Sister Marie Benedict. She stumbled on the hem of her habit, wax from the candle she carried dripping down her arthritic-curled hands.

‘Get down, child!’ shrieked Sister Marie. ‘Hurry! The bombs are falling!’ She chivvied Isola towards the shelter, but Isola ducked around her and retreated to the altar. ‘The bombs, the bombs!’ the nun continued to yell. ‘What are you doing? Can’t you hear the sirens?’

At her last word, a great shadow seemed to pass over the sun, and the light shining through the faces of the window-apostles went out. Then a low caterwauling cut through the air – so loud Isola slammed her hands over her ears, so awful her blood ran reptilian-cold.

An air-raid siren.

Then the chapel roof began to crack – dust fell, colouring Isola like an antique statue, and the painted starry sky began to split.

Something knocked her forcefully off her feet. Isola rolled over, looking wildly for her attacker, but there was no-one but the nun, who was already hurrying towards the shelter. Isola hugged the base of the altar, as one by one the long-stemmed candles blew out. She screamed as the shelter doors blew wide and she went whooshing down the aisle, dragged feet-first on some invisible rope. She tumbled down the stairs, and Sister Marie slammed the door behind her.

Isola, in the dark with her heartbeat. *Live, live, live,* it commanded her with every thrash.

After Isola’s first day at St Dymphna’s, she’d sat on the end of Mother’s bed and asked, ‘Why did they make a fountain for that nun? The one who was so mean to you?’

‘Sister Marie?’ Mother had replied, poking her dozy head out from under the blankets. ‘Well, she was a wonderful woman before, from what I understand.’

‘Before what?’

‘Before she went a little mad, darling. She was in London during the Blitz, and she never got over it – in fact, she probably got worse. When she was my teacher, she hated noise, movement, and children especially – and children as you know cannot be anything but whorls of noise and movement. She hated anything out of the ordinary. She hated the stories we told one another. She went on an absolute crusade against what she called “the demonic supernatural” – she started burning Enid Blyton books behind the library before they forced her to retire!’

A self-hating Nimue, Isola had thought at the time. Now, a split. And so she’d avoided Sister Marie’s spectre as it wandered the school in her old-fashioned habit, stuck in a long-finished battle, ears always cocked for sirens.

The whole shelter was shaking now. Tectonic plates shifted below. Isola imagined the sky slashed in two, solidified blood pouring down as rain and ash.

There were voices in the shelter with her – girls crying, whispering prayers, asking each other whether they’ll survive the night. Someone clutched her hand and amongst the whimpering she heard Florence’s voice repeating, ‘You brought her here . . . You brought her here . . .’ and Sister Marie was rattling down her rosaries, spewing rapid prayers in the same language Florence sang in.

Isola screamed and screamed, pounding on the door, until the world shook apart beneath her.

❄

Isola opened her eyes. Her ears were ringing. She lay flat on her back on the chapel floor, staring up at the spokes of pinwheeling stars on the uncracked ceiling. Someone had put their rolled-up blazer under her head. She turned and saw she was at the top of the stairs, and the space below the shelter was stocked with brooms and bottles of window cleaner. Bony fingers jabbed at her neck pulse.

‘I’m all right,’ murmured Isola, dazedly trying to swat the hands away.

‘Like hell,’ grunted Sister K, picking up her cane with one hand and Isola with the other. Isola must have been even skinnier than she’d thought.

Girls had gathered at the chapel entrance. Gasps and stares were shared when Sister K supported her out. Bridget was snickering somewhere. Isola saw Grape in the crowd. She looked afraid – but was she afraid *of* Isola, or *for* her?

❄

‘Don’t undy-stand.’

Isola groaned and kneaded her forehead with her knuckles. Explaining things to Bunny was not at all like explaining things to Alejandro. Where was he, anyway?

‘Florence. Was at. My school,’ she growled, kneeling on the pink carpet to speak to the gargoyle directly. ‘And so was Grandpa Furlong. I didn’t see him, but –’

‘Didn’t see,’ repeated Bunny sarcastically. ‘You are *fool*. You are easy to catch by little ghostie girl!’

‘Maybe I didn’t see him, but I know he was there!’ said Isola defensively. ‘He has this pipe –’

‘What attracts fishies, little fool?’ He peered at her with a beady eye. ‘A *lure*.’

‘But this was different!’ cried Isola, exasperated. ‘It’s not just the princes now. She’s turning the world against me. The woods, the school – I’ll go mad if it keeps happening. I have to do it!’

‘Have to what?’

‘Kill the cosmic circus. Like Ted Hughes said. I have to kill this connection she has with me before – I don’t know, before I pull a Sylvia Plath!’

One of Bunny’s ears flopped up. ‘Don’t undy-stand.’

Suddenly Isola was weeping; she couldn’t help it. After a moment, the gruff gargoyle put one paw on her knee. The first sign of kindness he’d given.

She flattened his fluffy ear under her hand and planted a kiss on his forehead, a seed of compassion. ‘Please, Bunny. Help me.’

Bunny looked steadily at her with his ruby eyes and for once didn’t snarl at the nickname. ‘The split never done that before?’ he asked after a minute.

Isola shook her head. ‘No, Sister Marie’s always been harmless.’

‘Then ghostie girl affect her too,’ concluded Bunny, and he twitched his nose, his disgruntled expression almost softening. She smiled too, and Alejandro entered the room in time to see it, and if she’d known what would happen next, she would never have let the gargoyle in.

A World without Treasure

‘I’ll haunt you,’ Isola said, lying blankly on the bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling. The gargoyle emerged from under the bed and sat up on his hind legs, haughty nose sniffing the air.

She had done her begging, her shouting, her guilt-tripping – she was down to wounding. She had shown her ugliest side and Alejandro was leaving anyway, and these would be his last memories of her.

‘I’ll haunt you forever, and you probably won’t even mind.’

How deep did she have to dig her nails in before he caved? She didn’t care. If someone had to tear this world of lovely flesh away from her – from Edgar and James and Grape and Mother and Father – then it could be him, not Florence.

‘Please, Isola.’ He sounded hurt.

She turned her head slightly to look at him. Alejandro didn’t owe her anything – not his protection, or his kindness, or even his presence. He was wreathed in the rosy light from her bedside lamp, and that wide black window was propped open, ready to swallow him whole.

‘You will not be alone.’ Alejandro smiled fondly, but his eyes glittered wet. He twisted the diamond pins on his cuff. ‘The gargoyle will protect you – I have made him swear. And you will have Edgar and your family. Please remember that Grape is not your enemy. And neither is James,’ he added, his restless fingers stilling. ‘You may have deigned him a prince, but he is not like us, Isola Wilde. He is, after all, only human.’

He was standing close to the window now, and Isola didn’t remember him stepping back. She jumped up, knocking the Pardieu book from the nightstand, as she seized his hand and tried to drag him back. ‘Ale, listen! I trust you, I know you won’t hurt me. Last night was just an accident –’ He winced but she ploughed on. ‘I’m okay, so why are you leaving? Are you tired of me? Are you *scared* of her?’

‘Stop.’ His voice was gentle, but she felt herself fall back on the bed with the force of it, hunching over.

Slowly, Alejandro crouched down and retrieved *The Pardieu Fables and Fairytales.* She wanted to leave it where it was, draw a crime-scene chalk outline around its splayed pages, keep everything as it was before Alejandro left.

He set it gently on her knee, the pages open, and her hands trembled over the story *Wolverine Queen.* So terrible the things that people who loved each other could do to one another, like she and Alejandro were doing now – and she flipped past the pages, pausing, when she read the word ‘dragon’. And though Alejandro was still there and she still had a chance to change his mind, she remembered Mother speaking . . .

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘The sixth dragon,’ intoned Mother. ‘Desertion.

‘At last there was only one. The first-born prince. The bravest one who had promised the King and Queen the safe return of all their children. His brothers were gone; his sister seemed beyond reach. And the sixth dragon came for him that night, in his thoughts, as he lay by the dying embers of his small campfire. Desertion teased and needled him from afar. The first prince despaired, and his steadfast heart began to fail him. His loyalty to his quest, to the lost remnants of his royal siblings, vanished like the last hot ash on the wind, and there the prince lay and moved no more, and he was never there to rescue anyone else again in this world.’

❄

‘Isola Lileo Wilde. Listen to me.’ Alejandro had placed his hands on her shoulders, holding her at a slight distance. ‘To answer your first question: I will not stay, because I fear for you while I remain a presence. What has overcome my brothers-in-arms could just as easily ensnare me. I have already proven that.’

She couldn’t look at him. Her eyes were fixed on the words that Mother had read aloud so long ago, and six tears dripped down Isola’s cheek in succession, thickly splattering the crinkled pages. Each drop shone a

different colour for a lost prince. Yellow like Grandpa Furlong's mandolin. Pink for Rosekin's glow. Red for Christobelle's tangled hair. Black for Ruslana's lips. Brown for James's eyes.

'Two: I would sooner tire of sunlight.'

And now her tears fell purple, the colour of Alejandro's cravat, then dust-orange, like the land his mother came from, then grey as the haze of harbour London, and finally green as the graves in which his sisters three were slumbering.

He planted a goodbye kiss on each of her tear-streaked cheeks, another on the back of her limp hand. A gentlemen to the end.

'And three: no, I am not afraid of Florence. I fear nothing but a world without treasure – without you, my *bella querida*, my *séptima pequeña princesa*.'

The Gargoyle Commandments

‘Rules are: No water,’ Bunny said imperiously.

‘Why?’

‘Water make I weak. Too much water kill,’ Bunny said ominously. ‘Rule number next: No Mama.’

‘What? But – but she’s ill, she’s relying on me!’

‘How long she been ill?’ he demanded.

‘Since . . . since before I was born.’

‘Then she can live without.’

‘No, I’m telling you, she can’t! She got worse when I turned ten – she needs me, she’s not like she was –’

‘What happened? When Solawile was ten?’

‘I . . . I . . .’

‘What happened?’

‘*I don’t know!*’ yelled Isola. ‘All I remember was that she was happy enough, and then it all turned rubbish – Dad was a mess, he wouldn’t sleep in the same room as her, Mother wouldn’t even get out of bed. She stopped wearing her wedding ring . . .’

She remembered going into the master bedroom, to check again that Mother hadn’t died in her sleep. She remembered drawn curtains, musty air, and the steady rise and fall of Mother’s chest like rolling mountains. Then a glint on the bedside table. The golden wedding band, cold without the contact of skin to survive off. Isola stole it and wore it every day and night on a chain around her neck. If Mother had noticed, she never mentioned it.

Bunny huffed and didn’t even glance at the wedding-ring necklace she wore. ‘Rule number last,’ he snapped. ‘No *argue*.’

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Be kind to the smallest, Alejandro had told her, and if it hadn't been for those words echoing from some distant unmapped constellation of her brain, Isola would have lost her temper hours ago. He'd only been in her room a day, and she was already battling a near-hatred for the rabbit-creature. He was snappish and inconsiderate; he had intruded upon the last stabilities in her life – her Alejandro, her upstairs-and-down-the-hall kingdom of Wilde Girl. Despite seeming to possess an intelligence equal to a human's, he gnawed incessantly on the furniture, snuffled and burrowed through her things, and took great pleasure in moving items from their rightful places, upsetting the careful disarray.

Upon discovering that he had taken each of her bras from the drawers and playfully tossed them about the room, fang-marks obvious in all the clasps, she clamped down on her tongue and offered him food.

The gargoyle crinkled his black nose over the tea saucer set in front of him. 'What this?'

'Canned plums,' said Isola, waggling her finger at him. 'Don't think I've forgotten. You were eating them last autumn, when the tree was still around.' He bared his teeth at her, and she added, 'I'd recognise those fangs anywhere.'

Nosing the saucer and its purple muck away, he said loudly, 'Don't eat plums.'

'Thyme, then?'

'Don't eat thyme.'

'This isn't a restaurant, Peter Rabbit.'

'Gargoyle!'

'Fine! What the hell do *gargoyles* eat?'

The gargoyle showed his long black teeth again and ran his tongue over them. 'Rare meat.'

'Rare, like raw?' said Isola uncertainly.

'Rare like *hard-to-find.'* He smacked his lips but didn't elaborate.

She tried to tell Bunny the story of *why* exactly she was being haunted and her brothers possessed. He seemed intent on morphing the fault as her own, whatever way she spun the tale – Bunny had already passed his judgement.

'Little ghosties,' muttered Bunny. 'Little house full of little ghosties. Garden with pesties. Big forest with lotsa Nim bratties, oh yes. And girly wants to keep them! Fool girl Solawile wants to make *friends* . . .'

‘What’s that s’posed to mean?’

Bunny wrinkled his nose at her. ‘Little fooly girl makes friends with Nim bratties, then is *surprised* when make Nim enemies, too?’

Bunny spent the next few hours bouncing about the room, getting used to the sponginess of his surroundings. He leapt from the bed to the chest of drawers, to the desk, to the windowsill, to the top of Isola’s head when she wasn’t looking.

Perched serenely, he said, ‘Ghostie Florey. Daughter of wood witch. Why you give her name?’

Isola stopped trying to push him off her head and considered his question. ‘Because she’s a girl,’ she finally answered, shrugging. ‘She was like me, once upon a time. She deserves a name, at the very least.’

Bunny leaned over her forehead so they were eye-to-eye; beady reds into blue marbles. ‘You are strange one, Solawile.’

Then, something wonderful. Bunny gave Isola her first music-less night.

She heard so much without Florence’s songs – owls moaning battlecries to the mice and crickets roaming the night.

Alejandro wouldn’t come back. She hadn’t tried to summon the others; if he wouldn’t return, none of them would.

Snowflake Romantics

Her house, for a change; the screaming baby at Number Thirty-seven had ruined the mood. Bunny grumbled about being made to hide in the garden. Father insisted they keep the lights on and the door wide open; they drew a single sheet over them and kept their conversation to whispers.

Together Isola and Edgar made grand plans for travels around the world, on foot through the Amazon sludge and aboard a hot air balloon over Nepal. They plotted to get Ellie Blythe Nettle and Grape, who obviously liked one another, together at last. In the bliss of togetherness, they now regarded all singledom as a social tragedy. When they kissed Edgar accidentally hooked his finger in the golden ring around her neck, and this time when he asked a question, she didn't hesitate to tell the truth. That when she was ten, Mother had stopped wearing her wedding ring, and now Isola wore it as an amulet – a reminder that she needed to protect her mother.

'How very *Lord of the Rings* of you,' he observed, and she made a face, tucking the ring under her collar.

'I've heard some of the girls at school laughing about it,' Isola said, in a tone of faux nonchalance. 'They've said . . . It'll make me crazy, like it did her.'

Edgar went very still.

Isola held her breath. They never talked about Mother; Isola didn't talk about what had been going on in her house all these years with anyone – not Grape, not James, not even the trees in Vivien's Wood, who could never spill the secrets she whispered into their knotholes.

'Isola Wilde. It's not a crime to be different, and you're not crazy.' He traced her collarbone, the cold necklace chain, then leaned in close to whisper the truth. 'You're *magic*.'

Just like that, Isola was teetering; the emotional, irrational voice inside her that spoke like Rosekin immediately demanded she tell him everything, *everything*, and he would understand. She could scoop Bunny out of the garden and he'd recognise him for what he was, she could drag him by his hand through a graveyard until she found a freshly unearthed spirit to take haunting, and together they'd live, nesting in the rotted rafters of reality.

Almost immediately, Rosekin-Isola was drowned out by a suspiciously Bunny-like voice. *Fool,* the memory called her, and she remembered the disbelieving way James stared at her these days, his head tilting and eyes narrowing, lips crushing a cigarette, and knew she couldn't tell Edgar all of her truths – maybe not ever.

Stiffening, Isola dropped her head, unwilling to meet his eyes as he smiled so lovingly at her. Her gaze travelled down the freeway of his jawline marked with shiny black-stubble cars, the graffiti that adorned his skin, spray-painted, sloganised, and knew Edgar was a city, a place she'd like to live.

'You should design a tattoo for me,' suggested Isola.

'Easy.' Edgar uncapped a pen from the side table and drew the bedsheet down. She started giggling and closed her eyes, feeling the glide of the felt-tip, the suck of her sponge-skin as the ink blotted through. 'Snow-flakes, right here, near your inner elbow. Maybe one here.' He sketched a beautiful webby flake on her hip bone. 'A secret snowflake.'

'How did you know?' Isola the Ice Girl whispered. She pressed her mouth against his before he could form an answer, but quickly pulled away. She'd shredded her lower lip on his braces; she held a tissue to the cut patch while he apologised over and over.

'I hate my braces, but I hate crooked teeth more. See?' he fingered the roof of his mouth, showing Isola the crowding molars.

'I don't know,' Isola said, smiling. 'I think crooked teeth are pretty rock and roll.'

When they brought their lips together again, her mouth was sticky with the day's remains of cherry lipstick, and a secret she'd almost told him – and maybe a little blood.

Crooked teeth and rock and roll, Edgar painted on the diary-wall before he left in the morning.

Toxic Pretty

Isola heard sharp feet kicking at her window.

‘What is it?’ she hissed, opening the window a crack. ‘What do you want, Winsor?’

The faerie was slumped on the windowsill. She didn’t answer; her green glow had dulled to a sickly rinse.

‘Winsor?’ Isola picked her up tentatively, and the faerie took a stuttering breath.

‘Poison . . . flowers,’ she moaned.

‘What?’ Isola cupped the faerie in her palm.

‘What . . . did you do?’ wheezed Winsor. ‘Did you spray toxins . . . did you want . . . to kill me . . .’ Part of Winsor’s face was sketched with glittering green veins; her right eye was white and gooey.

‘No, no, of course not! I –’

The faerie stilled in her hand.

Bunny hopped up to the windowsill. ‘Who she?’ he asked interestedly.

‘Winsor, she said she’d been poisoned. Bunny, what do I do?’

‘Cut out infected eye,’ Bunny ordered.

‘What?’

‘She got toxin in eye, see? Cut out eye, or faerie die.’

Isola hesitated. She felt for a pulse and it was like an ant under her fingertip. ‘How did this happen?’

Bunny grunted mysteriously.

Nothing was small enough except for the safety pin Winsor had tried to steal. Isola used the pin and the silly booklet about amputations, thought of Christobelle’s sailor, *King Lear.*

Bunny sat in her lap to watch the impromptu operation with keen interest.

Like a balloon the eyeball popped and flooded, and she scooped it out, washing the hollow with the last drops in a vodka flask, hoping it was

enough to save a faerie she didn’t even like.

Dream-weaving

That night, she heard Mother crying in the bathtub.

When Isola shifted, Bunny leapt up from the floor and settled on her chest. His nails contracted over her heart. ‘You stay,’ he growled.

‘But Mum –’

‘Her or me, girly.’

‘Why?’ whispered Isola. ‘Why do I have to choose?’

Later she dreamed she held a bow carved from the bones of people she loved. She raised the bow, drew back the string, and released a flaming arrow like an insult. The arrow hit her target, and the full moon caught ablaze, a fireball shrieking heat and ash in the night sky.

She dreamed of the school gardens like Versailles; Mother on the mend, hospital-gown clad but smiling, strolling in the garden, an IV drip full of champagne rolling beside her. Then Mother turned, smiled at her. The sun caught her canine teeth and the reflecting light exploded, enveloping Isola, then the door, the room, then always the blinding light, the molten golden terror. Gasping awake to a room without princes made her wish she hadn’t woken at all.

The house was too quiet. Mother was sleeping. Father was working. Bunny watched Winsor snooze in her little matchbox bed, an oddly hungry gleam in the gargoyle’s red eyes.

Isola decided to go outside and taste a blade of grass by the herb patch. Sure enough, it fizzed on her tongue, a definite toxin.

DID YOU SPRAY SOMETHING ON THE GARDEN? she texted her father.

YEAH. I WAS SICK OF THOSE RABBITS TEARING UP EVERYTHING. COULDNT FIND WHAT U USED SO I BOUGHT SUM PESTICIDE STUFF. IF U R COOKING VEGETABLES, MAKE SURE U

CLEAN THEM OFF. BETTER YET, GO GET SUM OFF MRS LLEWELYN.

Isola turned her phone off, flushed out her mouth and went to check on Mother. It was clear now, why she'd cried all night – Father had poisoned her garden. He'd poisoned Winsor, and who knew how many rabbits and flowers and birds and fae-kind.

Isola went up to the attic.

It was a proper Anne Frank-attic, with hidden staircases and boxes and whole lives packed between foam and cardboard.

So much of her mother lived only in boxes now. Diaries, little snippets of her personality, dried and preserved like animal foetuses in jars, like pressed petals dissolving between old photographs and scribbled-in notebooks. There was a home video of Mother Wilde in her wild heyday, eight months pregnant and bikini-clad at the beach, marching with her stomach protruding like a prize. Dried pieces from the top tier of a wedding cake. Things of baby Isola's, too: moth-chewed romper suits and frilly bows to disguise baby baldness. A Spanish-to-English dictionary and a tarnished silver flute. Images of Father beardless, and, even stranger to her gaze, happy.

She found Mother's old medical files, expired prescriptions and X-rays of a broken arm, a stretching spine. There was an ultrasound of Isola, as well as another solemn little creature that didn't quite make it.

She took the X-rays back to her room and arranged them on the window, churchly artworks that filtered the light through Mother's insides.

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Florence and Christobelle and now Winsor – all these girls with missing eyes, and where did they go? She imagined a forest of eyes sprouting right out of the rich earth of Vivien's Wood, snaking towards the canopy on stalks of eyelashes; blinking lids, irises centering the flowers, another set of watchers. Isola rubbed and paranoid-picked at her own right eye, and overnight it grew bloody and inflamed, shot through with red veins like channels on Mars.

Winsor awoke after three days. Sitting up in her tissue-lined matchbox, she raised her hands to rub her eyes, and found the empty socket.

It was a hellish tantrum. Screaming, she beat her fists, tore at her hair. Isola thought the faerie would rage until her glow went out.

Winsor scrabbled at the windowsill, carving grooves in the wood with her sharp hands. When she tried to rip the delicate fabric of her own wings, Isola opened the window in a panic and Winsor zipped away.

‘Winsor, come back!’ Isola called desperately. ‘I’m sorry about what happened, but I need to check if you’re healing!’

‘I HATE YOU!’ howled the tiny voice. ‘You poisoned me and ruined my face and *I can’t wait till she kills you*!’

Meat and Bones

By May the whole lunar cycle ringed her neck – markings like the strangled birds had, but larger, clearer, like love bites. That's what the girls at school would see, anyway. Isola examined the perfect crescent moon nesting in the hollow of her throat, the half-moon at her collarbone. She dusted her neck with nude foundation and drew her tie as tightly as she could.

At the rosebush, something glittered in Dame Furlong's web. She had knitted a kiss goodbye. Isola smiled, and it reached her eyes.

❄

Grape had taped pictures of Olympians up in her locker, determined to lose her non-existent belly fat in time for the Spring Swimming Carnival.

Isola wrapped her arms around her middle and watched as Grape rifled through the book stacks, searching for homework she was half-certain she'd done. They were pretending the event in the chapel hadn't happened, but it was clear on her friend's face that Grape was actually worried *for* her – and that was comforting, even though Isola wished she needn't worry at all.

'You don't seem yourself,' said Grape hesitantly. 'Are you getting sick?'

Getting sick and tired of that question, actually, Isola thought. 'I'm fine.'

'If you say so . . .' Grape's face fell. 'It's just, Isola, don't take this the wrong way, but you've gotten *so* skinny . . .'

'And look at you,' Isola said quickly, hoping to steer the conversation away from its dangerous waters. 'You're a regular Xena Warrior Princess.'

Grape smiled at that.

Isola knew she had been working extra hard in the pool, developing her upper-body muscles in preparation for the upcoming Spring Swimming Carnival, and had been flashing 'the gun show' at her, at James, at Ellie Blythe, whenever she found an opportune moment in conversation.

‘Do you reckon if I win enough ribbons, Sister K will let me trade them in for good grades?’ Grape joked.

‘Yeah, and maybe your parents’ll give up on the whole “academics” thing once you win at the Olympics,’ said Isola.

Aside from the Guinevere and Arthur houses at St Dymphna’s, there were also Lancelot (yellow) and Merlin (green). A red plastic crown, which all the Arthur house girls had to wear, sat innocently at the back of Grape’s locker. Bridget McKayde was in Arthur house. They won every event because they were more talented, which was fair enough, but they wore the crowns as though they’d earned them.

Isola and Edgar jumped up and down on Number Thirty-seven’s backyard trampoline, absorbing different views of one another. Isola, her hair fanning even wilder around her; Edgar, topsy-turvy, doing a backflip, his huge feet over his head.

They tried to kiss while they bounced, a pair of anti-gravity Valentines.

‘If you really don’t like Guinevere,’ Edgar was saying against her lips, ‘you could always go solo – make up your own house.’

They bumped teeth with an audible clink. Isola laughed and pulled back. ‘Like what?’

‘Like Mordred.’

‘Remind me which one he was again?’

‘The in-bred little brat who killed his dad, King Arthur.’

‘Oh, yeah. But with a name like Mordred, what hope did he have?’

Edgar bounced out the syllables: ‘Mor – *dred*. It’s the most evil name of all time.’

‘Wonder if Bunny’ll prefer Mordred,’ Isola wondered aloud.

‘What?’

She pulled him into a high-rise kiss. They seemed to float suspended for the longest moment, held up by invisible mannequin strings, gravity loosening its choke-hold.

❄

Maybe Grape was right. Isola might have been falling sick. She slept most of the weekend, and didn’t feel right; her voice was growing hoarse, and

she felt alien in her now sickly-thin body.

She peeled off her clothes and stood in her underwear before the mirror, eyes narrowing as she critiqued the reflection. A body like Marie Antoinette after her diet of cake and sugar and pretence had been replaced by occasional mouthfuls of moonlight, slitted between prison-barred windows.

Bunny came scuffling out from under the bed and Isola hastened to cover herself.

‘I is hungry now,’ he announced.

She pulled her shirt down over her head, mussing up her hair, and huffed. ‘Then eat something.’

‘Fool get me food.’

‘Yeah, and you haven’t eaten anything I’ve offered, except a tonne of sweets. So what do you want?’

Bunny seemed to be choosing his words carefully. ‘No eat plums,’ he said slowly, ‘not till starving. No eat thyme. Sweets and meats, candies and bloodies, oh yes.’

‘Meat?’ Isola repeated, shimmying into her skirt. ‘Okay, I’ll stop at the deli on the way home –’

‘Not your icky ucky meats!’ His red eyes gleamed and he ran his tongue along his upper lip. ‘*Rare* meats . . . Yummy raw delicious wriggly . . .’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Nimue meats,’ Bunny elaborated. ‘Magical meats, fool girl. Faerie, Fury, goblin, ghostie, I eats them all up, yes . . . Don’t eats much,’ he added, in a tone evidently meant to reassure her. ‘Only little here and there – likes faeries, long as not too much flower in them, and Bunny likes unicorns best, rarest and tastiest, makes I strong to be protector!’

Isola clasped the ring on her necklace in shock. ‘Let me make this perfectly clear,’ she said through numb lips. ‘I agreed, with Alejandro, to keep you fed and housed. You never said I’d have to kill *unicorns* for you! That wasn’t part of our deal!’

‘Not unicorns!’ snapped Bunny. ‘Unicorn. Just one last for ages!’

‘But they’re a dying herd – I never even get to see them! It’s so hard for them to live anywhere, even Avalon’s not safe for them anymore! They’ve just had their first foal in years –’

‘Perfect. Foal unicorn is yummy yummy. Keep I strong for ages, girly.’

‘Forget it!’

‘Then forget deal! Fool is more foolish than Bunny thought. Fool will give up self life for monster baby’s!’

‘They’re not monsters!’ shouted Isola. ‘They’re intelligent, sensitive creatures, and they’re alive, and you’ve got no right to choose when their lives end!’

‘Then fool chooses her own end.’ He scurried into the cupboard, disappearing into the childhood toys Isola hadn’t had the heart to throw away. After a moment, she heard the crackle of shiny wrappers as he bit open sweets he’d hidden for emergencies.

‘And I thought feeding Rosekin was a struggle,’ she muttered.

❄

‘I is leaving,’ Bunny announced, like a precocious teen runaway hoping to be begged to stay. ‘I has no power with no foods.’

Isola ignored him.

‘If I leaves, you will be possessed,’ growled Bunny, ‘and she will destroy you.’

‘And you’re still gonna leave?’ snorted Isola.

‘No matter. You is already possessed.’

Isola froze.

‘You has been for while. She is dark force round you. But you is strong when you has walls – ghosties and mermys and such. Bunny last wall. No more wall . . . No more Isola.’

He bounded up to the windowsill, nosed it open.

‘Bunny, wait!’

He threw her an ugly look.

‘So you can pronounce my name, after all?’

The gargoyle snorted derisively and bounded off the windowsill, darting into the forest like a swift night wind. She pitched a caramel after him, one for the road. She didn’t care what a nasty gargoyle said. Isola would build her own walls.

❄

When Isola dug out the pamphlet from under her bed, rang the Church of the Unlocked Heart and told the receptionist what she wanted, she was first asked, not if she were a lunatic, but her name.

‘Lux Lisbon.’

‘We’d be happy to help you, Miss Lisbon. You’ve made the right decision in calling us. Now, if you could please answer some questions for me – do you believe wholeheartedly in God?’

Shiva. Vishnu. Aphrodite. Nimue. ‘Sure.’

The click of acrylic nails on a keyboard; like ants in metal boots marching down Isola’s spine. She shivered them away.

‘Uh-huh. And how old are you, Miss Lisbon?’

‘Sixteen.’

A pause drifted down the current between them.

‘Sorry,’ said the receptionist, ‘we don’t do teenage exorcisms.’

The Seventh Princess – An Instalment

‘Finally, there were no more princes to defeat. And yet, there were no other dragons, either, because the princes had done their parts, and they prayed with dead hands and lips their love to their sister. There, asleep in the dragon’s lair, she felt each and every last brother leave this world, and she tasted their final words like magic potions, and upon them she grew quietly stronger.

‘The prayers of the eldest prince awoke her from a deep sleep, and she knew they had all left her now, and she had to somehow find the strength to defeat the last and worst dragon.’

‘What was it?’

‘Loneliness.’

Teenage Hexorcism

She salted every windowsill and doorway. She hung charms from doorknobs and filled her drink bottle with holy water she'd taken from the school chapel. She put some holy water in her parents' things, too – Mother's bathwater, Father's beer. She painted protective hieroglyphs on each of her ribs. Anything. Everything.

All that wasn't enough.

It was the witching hour when Florence tapped on the window. Isola longed to break her wishbone fingers.

She clutched the cross-shaped piece of glass over her heart, her last weapon. There were no brothers left, no Bunny. She couldn't go to Edgar. She couldn't risk him.

'*You brought her here!*' screamed Florence through the window. 'You summoned my mother to the only place I thought she couldn't hurt me!'

'I didn't!' Isola yelled, scrambling out of bed. 'I didn't do anything. I don't even know this witch!'

She ran to Mother, who was in her bedroom and only half-awake. Mother rolled over to make room and muttered a few dreamy words of comfort. Isola burrowed into the goose-down pillows and even from Mother's safe place, she could hear the one-eyed girl singing.

Cage, Moon, Stripe

Then, the worst.

‘Eat,’ said Father Wilde gruffly. ‘You’re skinny as a bean sprout.’Her ribs protruded like seashell armour. Father poked her in the side to illustrate his point and his finger seemed to cut between them. She heard a dull *clank*.

Edgar had noticed, too. He watched her with a sheen of brittle concern over his creased brow. He didn’t say anything, however, and Isola appreciated his tact, although she took care to wear her loosest blouses while on their bedroom dates.

When he was picking a film from his stack of DVDs, she spied a sketchbook on the bedroom floor and flicked through it. They all seemed to be sketches of her: portraits in profile, in deep thought, with straightened hair, golden-cage hair, just-got-out-of-bed hair. Glittery nails, bare blonde eyelashes and the occasional freckle, moon-shaped markings that looked like birthmarks in charcoal.

And with sudden clarity, she realised she didn’t look like that any longer. Her unbrushed hair curled lankly, the rainbow streaks ran dry, and she was much too thin to be the girl whose smile seemed alight in these drawings.

She couldn’t reconcile it – the terror and loneliness of Florence and her life without her princes, with the bubbling that Edgar inspired in her belly. How dare she seek out this occasional happiness when everything else in her life was going so very wrong?

He deserves better, she heard again in the back of her mind, but this time, the whisper came in her own voice.

❄

She stripped and twisted on the spot before the magic mirror.

It hardly looked real.

Black stripes from her thighs to her ankles. A noose-ring of moons around her throat. Worst of all was her torso.

Her skin seemed translucently pale, and instead of ribs, she could see – feel them – the skeleton of an empty cage. Steel-barred, girl-shaped, like a dressmaker's doll. Half-mannequin parts.

'It's not real,' she whispered. It was like the bombing of the chapel, all witchcraft – all in her head. She could still hear her heart beating loudly, a disco thump in her ears.

Killers

In the potted rosebush, Dame Furlong was dead in her web.

‘WINSOR!’

The faerie appeared almost instantly. Her daisy petal eyepatch was oozing green and she was trembling with fury. ‘What?’

‘Did you do this?’ Isola pointed at the shredded spider, who was scattered in pieces through her web-home.

Winsor’s remaining eye blazed wickedly; she opened her mouth to form the denial. ‘No, I –’

‘Don’t you dare lie to me, you monster!’ Isola bellowed.

‘Me?’ Winsor flew right up to Isola’s face, her features sharper than usual, her remaining eye bulging madly. ‘ME? You’re the monster, Isola Wilde! You hate me, you always have! You want me to starve, you love those icky insects more than me, you poisoned the flowers so I’d die. You stole my eye and ruined my face and *I hate you*!’

‘Leave,’ said Isola, struggling to keep the furious tears at bay. ‘Leave this garden – leave Avalon – and don’t ever come back.’

Winsor blazed greener and greener. She was a nuclear meltdown in miniature, and the disfiguring green veins on her face pulsed ugly. Opening her tiny fanged mouth, Winsor shrieked, ‘I HATE YOU! NO WONDER ALEJANDRO LEFT YOU HERE TO DIE!’

Isola’s hand snapped up, almost of its own accord, and swatted the faerie to the ground. Winsor bounced on the garden path, cried out in pain and shock. Isola brought up her foot, sheathed in its deadly combat boot, and brought it down, crushing the faerie like an autumn leaf.

A gasp, a swift flash of regret.

A curious surge of relief.

She went into the flowerbed to find Bunny.

Carnivore

It got easier after that first meal. Dinner was crystallised clumps of fairy limb – a tiny hand here, a Barbie foot there. She tried to pick out all the glossy hair and leaf and petal skirts first. Bunny complained when their bellies were full of blossoms or nectar. The creature who loved candies despised the naturally sweet.

‘It hard to catch faeries,’ he explained, munching happily. ‘I is happy Solawile catch them for me.’

‘They’ve always hung around this place,’ muttered Isola. She worked to keep the garden beautiful, luring faeries, easy prey.

‘Not no more,’ said Bunny, shaking his head, his soft ears flopping. ‘Not now wood witch daughter Florey eats them up.’

But it wasn’t enough.

‘Unicorn would be nice next, yes. Most easy to kill foal,’ he added. ‘Most easy to catch. Strong magic in the meat, strong Bunny to keep you safe!’

Isola bent down to thumb the fairy wings from his mouth, the ghoulish crumbs of his last meal. ‘I already told you. I won’t kill a unicorn. Especially not a foal.’

‘Fool kill Winsor,’ said Bunny slyly. ‘Fool can kill anything.’

Isola’s stomach was churning. ‘But you’re too small. You’d waste it.’

‘Can’t all at once, no.’ Bunny poked out his tongue. ‘Got to bury and nibble at every now and then and again. Weeks and weeks of yummy magic baby flesh.’

❄

She’d already picked her next target. In her music box was a lighter she’d stolen from James in an effort to force him to kick his smoking habit. Retrieving it, she lit the flame in the fireplace and waited. Soon she heard

clacking nails, and ash dribbled down the chimney. The lizard-like dragon came slithering down, sniffing curiously, flicking its tongue. It was no bigger than a dog and had raw-red skin, good-luck golden claws.

Catching him by his scaly neck, Isola dragged him from the chimney, and with the glass shard stabbed him between the dark jewels of his eyes. He burst open like a piñata, gemstones tumbling from his gaping wound.

Bunny squealed with joy when Isola brought him the dragon corpse. She didn't want the jewels, however – which were no doubt collected as ransom for some poor kidnapped princess – and buried them where the plum tree had been, hoping one day a tree would grow sprouting fruits with diamond seeds.

Upstairs, Isola found the gargoyle playing with the dragon's gold claws. Bursting fit with Nim-meat, he was contentedly eating sweets again. Now that Isola had upheld her end of the bargain, she hoped Bunny would uphold his.

'I'm being possessed. Like you said,' she whispered. She rapped her fingers against a cold steel bar that had replaced a rib.

'Yes. Ghostie Florence is taking over,' said Bunny. 'She go deep and deeper until there's no Solawile left, only ghostie there in the flesh.'

Isola crouched down, lifted him into her lap. 'How do I make it stop?'

'Slowly,' he said, and gently nipped the tip of her finger. She'd never seen him this kind or reassuring. She wondered how frightened she must look or how much he had appreciated the meal. 'With Bunny's help. Bunny go up high!' he added, rearing up on his stout hind legs. 'Up high, like the churchy-stone gargoyles, yes.'

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

'The seventh princess awoke in a cave, weak and thin but alive. She could hear her brothers calling to her on the wind, and first thought it a dream, until she heard it anew – their voices echoing down from the top of the mountain. She left the cave, determination stimulating her bones, and she climbed the cliff-side, breathless and exhausted. Her brothers didn't let her stop, and she struggled to the top, and there the last dragon sat, curled and

sleeping, surrounded by sweets and treasures, long scraps of blonde hair, and the piled bones of the Six Princes.'

Isola hid her face in her hands dramatically; Mother ploughed on.

'Some were charred black. The dragons had obviously enjoyed a great feast. Without waking the dragon, the Seventh Princess, sobbing silently, took a rock and cut off all her golden hair – and used it to lash the sharpest bones together, making a great sword as big as herself: a weapon to defend herself with.'

Hair, Meat, Flower

She got up an hour earlier than usual – it wasn't as though she was sleeping, anyway – and spent the time in front of the magic mirror. The mirror hardly spoke anymore, and when it did, only in written whispers, tiny words in dead languages. All the intelligible things it said – 'DON'T GO INTO THE WOODS', 'DON'T TRUST THE NIMUES' – were fair warnings given unfairly late.

Isola spent the extra time on her hair, spraying and teasing it up into a big blonde cage, a hollow hive. She showed it to Bunny, who sat imperiously on the vanity.

'How's that?'

He grunted, and she lifted him into the makeshift nest. She felt his warm weight shifting, and it was surprisingly comforting.

'Victorian girlies put I in their bonnets,' he complained. 'Lotsa room.'

'Where did the boys put you?' she asked, styling her cage of hair closed around him.

'Their soup. Well,' he added, snickering, 'they *tried*, oh yes. But Bunny can't be caughts, missy clever girl!'

'Unfortunately, it's the twenty-first century and they'll notice if I wear a bonnet.'

'And won't notice hair?'

'Oh, they'll notice,' said Isola grimly, 'but they've never *not* noticed me, no matter what I do.'

❄

'I can't see the board past her hideous hair,' hissed Bridget, who sat behind Isola in French class.

‘What *is* that bird’s nest?’ muttered Bridget’s neighbour. ‘She looks completely mad.’

‘Like her mother,’ said Bridget.

‘*Folie*,’ whispered Isola over her shoulder. ‘That’s the French word for “mad”.’ She turned back to the front of class.

Bridget and Friend were too shocked to reply.

Teeth pricked at her scalp, little Excaliburs. ‘Good girl,’ came an approving mumble from the depths of her hair. ‘Who is fool *now*?’

❄

It was raining when Father dropped Isola off at the gate the next day. Throwing her school bag over her head, she sprinted up the garden path, skidding mud down the convent halls and ignoring the glares of her schoolmates.

She took him to the third-floor bathroom that no-one ever used and plopped him under the hand dryer. He looked adorable but extremely bothered, his fur flattened under the warm air. He was only slightly damp, and when he was dried, he was as fluffy as a long-haired cat. Isola did her best to stifle her laughter but it came out as little snorts, and an unamused Bunny bit her finger when she picked him up to return him to his golden perch.

He usually got restless around fourth period, yawning, clamping his little teeth into her hairline, chewing on the bars of his golden cage. She started putting sweets in her hair, things for him to suck on. On Monday, she wore a candy cane, stuck like a chopstick in a geisha’s topknot. Its stripes reminded her of Florence’s stockings and she was unsettled, but for once Bunny was content.

‘Talk about attention-seeking,’ muttered Bridget as she passed in the hallway, and Bunny’s claws contracted into Isola’s skull. She hissed in pain; Bridget shot her a filthy look.

Bunny muttered evilly whenever the girls at school so much as wafted their perfumed auras in Isola’s direction, so she stuck a fuchsia pinwheel in her Bride of Frankenstein beehive. Colours and movement distracted him.

Isola was a matador, rippling silk banners in the Spanish wind. Bunny was as bull-headed as ever.

It was strange, but it was working. Her ribs remained like steel bars, but her skin felt thicker daily. She was still bruised; her neck still burned; her voice still cracked. But with Bunny so close, whispering to her all day, she felt lighter; occasionally, she even felt human again. Like a gargoyle over a church, he offered protection from on high; his spirit-repellant abilities enclosed her like her very own invisible golden cage – Isola very quickly pushed that image from her mind. She didn't want to link her thoughts to Florence, for fear of unwittingly summoning said devil.

In exchange for his increased protection, Isola extended her search for Bunny's food, with no less self-hatred for the task but a renewed sense of gratitude towards the small rabbit-creature who was fulfilling Alejandro's last promise. She started sweeping through strangers' gardens on her way home from school. She captured more faeries and a straw-man imp, which Bunny wolfed down and promptly asked for more.

Mama Sinclair's old garden was particularly thriving. The faeries that used to live in the Wilde garden gathered there, whispering amongst themselves, frightened of being gobbled by the ghost girl. They didn't know to be afraid of Isola, and smiled when her shadow fell upon them.

Weeks passed. She tried to live as averagely as possible. Father was as gruff as ever. Mother seemed perplexed by Isola's distance, but she didn't mention it. Isola saw Edgar nearly every evening, first forcing Bunny to stay home; he watched with glowing eyes as she crossed the street. Isola didn't know how he kept Florence at bay – but he certainly seemed stronger now, his system juicy with other creatures' blood, and he exuded a slight aura, radiating secret strength.

'Maybe the so-called wood witch *is* Vivien,' she wondered aloud, after Father had dropped her at the school gates. It had been so long since she'd visited those woods she'd roamed since she could walk. She could hardly recall the exact shades of the fairy-ring mushrooms, the sound of birdcall tangling in the canopies, the initials her once-romantic parents had carved in the Vigour Mortis tree.

Bunny flexed his paws, securing his grip on her hair as she walked. 'What?' he said gruffly.

‘You know. Nimue.’ Isola plucked a newly bloomed jonquil from the garden, brought it to her nose and inhaled deeply. ‘Maybe she’s the one behind all this. The forest is named for her, after all – maybe she realised I didn’t deserve them, so she took my brothers away.’

‘Don’t believe,’ snorted Bunny. ‘Nimue is story. Like human God. Everyone want magic origin tale.’

‘And *I* shouldn’t believe it or you don’t?’

‘Both.’

Isola twirled the flower absentmindedly. When she remembered with a pang that she had no faerie at home to feed, she stuck it over her ear instead of in her pocket.

‘Then where did you come from?’

Bunny leaned down and nipped the tip of her ear as he pulled the flower free and spat it to the ground, in what he evidently thought an affectionate gesture. His teeth were syringe-sharp.

‘Came when fool girl needed me.’

Water and Stone

The Spring Swimming Carnival had rolled round at last. Isola tried to pin up her hair into the usual puffed-up Antoinette crown, but something was lodged at the roots. Reaching into the mass, Isola pulled out what had been tangled there – clumps of pearls, gathered on a string like the Bloodpearl Mermaid's symbolic kills. Isola gave a great start of fright and the pearls fell into the bathroom sink, rattling down the drain like echoes of drowned calls for help.

'I'm not afraid,' said Isola, then louder, in the steadiest voice she could manage, 'I'm not. Not of you.'

The princes had been reappearing in her life in the same order they'd vanished – the reverse order they'd first entered her life. Unbidden in her mind came the image of the mermaid rising up like some oceanic spirit, bloody and calling her six-year-old self down to the shore with a gentle smile, a beckoning hand. That was her Christobelle. But what of the Bloodpearl Mermaid – the seasalt-blooded serial killer who hunted along the caves and the docks, who had killed countless people out of some misguided hatred and had, inexplicably, decided to love her?

Bunny was perched on her schoolbag, his small red eyes pinning her in place like a butterfly.

'Mermy girl. She tried bad to hurt you?'

'Yes. She hurt me.'

'Not fear,' Bunny assured her. 'Florey has realised Solawile is protected again, and is trying to use ghosties 'gainst her. But I is here. I is staying.'

❄

In the change rooms Isola saw Grape stretching out her shoulder blades. Grape waved, but Isola could hardly find the strength to smile back.

Isola wasn't competing. She'd forged Father's signature on an excuse note, and Bunny had breathed a sigh of relief. She'd got changed anyway, into her Mordred House costume – her Guinevere gown simply dyed black. She wanted something funny to tell Edgar. He'd laugh at the thought of her, sitting poolside in a mourning dress, pretending to have school spirit.

Half the things she did these days were story fodder for him.

Poolside, Isola watched as Grape mounted the starting block, representing Arthur in the four-hundred-metre freestyle. She'd win easily, but as always, the tacky ribbon didn't matter to Grape; she only wanted to improve her previous time.

Sister K blew a whistle; the girls dived and the audience stamped their feet, cheering wildly. The girl from Guinevere House was already falling behind.

Grape reached the wall and turned, and out of habit Isola clapped and called, 'Go, Grape!'

It might have been her imagination, but it seemed as if Grape began swimming faster, her arms cutting like saws through the smooth water. In her wake were her competitors, their techniques flailing in comparison, the Guinevere girl trailing a full pool-length behind, and something dark blooming.

A red cloud was spreading steadily through the water.

'What is that?'

Her words were drowned in the cheers to all but Bunny. He scrambled to see through her fringe. 'What?'

Shockingly red, the cloud drifted after the swimmers.

'It looks like blood,' said Isola confusedly. *Has someone hit their head on the wall?*

And then the blood curled, rose to the surface, a sentient creature.

'No,' breathed Isola.

'What?'

'Christobelle.'

'Listen *now*,' said Bunny, low and urgent. 'Solawile is *safe*. Mermy can't hurt. Not here.'

But the Bloodpearl Mermaid was heading towards Grape.

Isola hadn't moved yet, but perhaps, warming herself over her heated brain, he felt the cogs turn first, the unconscious decision as it was made.

‘NO!’ Bunny shrieked as Isola stood, took a running leap and threw herself into the pool.

The cheers of the crowd turned to white noise underwater, like the kind between radio stations, the crackle between thunderbolts. She sank straight to the bottom with her eyes squeezed shut. When she opened them a beautiful reflection stared back at her.

The mermaid smiled at Isola. Twin clouds of hair bled out around their faces: one Mars-red, one moon-blonde. Christobelle looked towards the far end of the pool, where Grape was winning a one-girl race, and Isola seized her wrist, desperately shaking her head.

There was no air in Christobelle’s skin.

Christobelle, what has she done to you? Isola wanted to ask, but all that translated through her face was hatred for Florence, for this mermaid doppelganger, for the wood witch who was ruining two girls’ lives.

Christobelle took Isola’s free hand, keeping her effortlessly at the bottom of the pool. Her hair began to weave around Isola, forming manacles on her wrist, binding her shoulders close to the mermaid. One lock flicked gently across her face, a loving touch.

Christobelle grinned, a wicked toothy smile that was blue underwater, while Isola felt the pressure around her neck and couldn’t think of what to do but die. *As long as Grape’s okay,* she thought. The mermaid raised her hands, and instead of scale-like nails, she had ten black hooks – fishing hooks for fingernails. The red beauty mark on her cheek seemed moon-shaped now.

They were nose to nose, and Isola wasn’t struggling anymore. The seaweedy hair curled sickeningly down her throat, and just as Christobelle raised her hooked fingers to Isola’s right eye Bunny rocketed from the depths of her hair, roaring mutely. His black claws veered towards the blood-red marble of Christobelle’s remaining eye.

The mermaid shrieked and Isola was released from her wicked locks. Christobelle turned, but Bunny managed to stab his claw right through the beauty spot on her cheek where the sailor had tried to silence her. Christobelle screamed again and dissolved into boiling hot bubbles as the gargoyle went limp. Isola reached out to grab him and arms looped round her middle.

Suddenly she was cannoning towards the surface, cutting through the glass that separated the worlds with a birth-like gush, and she could hear panicked nuns and girls yelling, and her rescuer, a breathless Grape, shouted in her ear, ‘I would’ve got a personal best, ya idiot!’

Isola grabbed desperately around her. She couldn’t feel him. Her hand went automatically to her ring necklace for comfort and there was Bunny, slumped on her chest, curled over her heart.

She stared up at the ring of worried faces. She listened to her heart, her bagpipe lungs wheezing.

Her heart drummed a solo. Louder than ever.

Christobelle

Weaknesses

Bunny was weak but not dead. When he came to he wheezed half-hearted insults at her, mostly ‘fool girl’ and variants of, but she hushed and cradled him on the long walk home, stroking his fur and his shivering whiskers. Her hand brushed his front paw and she realised why water harmed him.

Like a real gargoyle, his little body was turning to stone.

❄

Leftovers. Isola dug up a purple faerie she’d buried in the flowerbed, ripped it apart and poked the pieces down his throat. He coughed and choked but swallowed, and she took him to the attic, swaddled him in her old baby blankets and swayed with him in the rocking chair.

‘Say goodbye to boy,’ whispered Bunny, as they rocked in the dusty sunlight.

‘To who?’

‘To boy you like. Boy you visit every day.’

‘Edgar?’

He wrinkled his pink nose; he didn’t like Edgar’s name any more than he liked Isola’s. ‘He no safe no more. Not with no Bunny to protect him.’

Isola’s sharp exhale caught on her teeth. ‘Bunny – you’ve been protecting Edgar, too?’

‘I is good gargoyle,’ he sighed, the old pride echoing in his voice.

Isola hugged him even closer to her chest. ‘Thank you.’

‘But now fool girl needs to say bye to boy,’ Bunny went on slowly. ‘Boy not safe when Bunny is weak. Ghostie will get him.’

‘Yes, I know. I will.’

‘And ghostie girl will try get to Solawile now. But Solawile strong. Solawile protect herself.’

Isola nodded, even though his red eyes had closed. He was getting heavy in her arms. ‘I will,’ she repeated. ‘You’ll be fine, Bunny, I promise.’

‘Bunny,’ sighed the little gargoyle. ‘No-one give name before. I like name Bunny.’

When Bunny had settled himself, Isola brought down her old cot from the attic and placed him by her bed. Then she stooped to lace up her combat boots as slowly as possible.

If Isola had married Edgar she would have run up the aisle towards him, before the band even had a chance to start playing, trailing lace and a honey-gold veil. The guests would have eaten frozen lilacs for dessert, the wedding cake would be made of plum liquor and cream, dinner would be served with fish filleted from Christobelle’s tail, and afterwards they could have lived in a tree in Vivien’s Wood for all she cared, haunting the secret passageways of St Dymphna’s.

She crossed the street for the last time.

Champagne Gone Sour

‘Oh, hey!’ he exclaimed as he opened the door. Isola Wilde stood on his porch, beautiful as always, a tad wilder than usual.

Her hair was a great wet nest of braids and knots, the unnatural colours faded to ice-creamy pastels, with beads tied like good-luck charms. Her floaty Guinevere dress was dyed black. She was soaked.

‘You can’t see me anymore,’ she whispered.

Edgar held open the door, but she didn’t enter the house. He stepped out on the porch and said, with a tiny laugh, ‘Well, you’re not invisible, so –’

‘I mean,’ she said, a little louder, ‘I can’t see you, either. We’re done.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t want to do *this* anymore, Edgar!’ She caught her hair in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut, as though she longed to pull her head off. ‘You deserve better!’

‘What’s wrong?’

Isola opened her eyes, looking startled. ‘Nothing.’

‘Something’s wrong. Something’s happened. What is it?’

Edgar tried to take her hand; she flinched away as though burned, a vampire to his holy hands, and began backing down the porch. ‘Just stay away! Please, just stay away!’

His feet couldn’t help but mirror hers as though they were waltzing at a distance. ‘Isola, what’s wrong? Tell me what happened, please!’

‘I don’t want to see you anymore!’ she shrieked, tripping backwards down the yard. Her voice was cracked clean in half, tears welled in her eyes and blood flushed her cheeks. ‘It’s over!’

‘Why?

‘Because you can’t draw champagne from a storm-water drain!’

‘What?’

‘It means you can’t salvage something good from something evil! You can’t save me from *her*!’

Edgar stopped at the end of the driveway, and Isola dashed in tears towards Number Thirty-six.

The asphalt she crossed was the River Styx. He rattled empty pockets; he had no coins to pay the ferryman with.

‘From her?’ he repeated, his gaze zeroing in on the second storey of the house across the road.

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘Sensing the presence of gold – her gold-flax hair – the great dragon awoke. Seeing the seventh princess there, armed with the weapon she’d made from her brothers’ bones, he grave a great roar, which turned swiftly into a booming laugh. People in villages far from the mountain ran for cover, fearing thunder, earthquakes.

‘“You cannot trap me here any longer,” she announced boldly. “I am the Seventh Princess – and you are alone!”

‘“But you are also alone,” said the Seventh Dragon, snorting great storm clouds of mirth. “And I am Loneliness. How can you hope to defeat me?’’

Two Isolas

Edgar sat at the kitchen table, feeling dazed. What had just happened? He felt a decision had been made for him; an invisible pressure on his shoulders had turned him in a circle and steered him down a path he hadn't chosen.

He rocked Puck's cradle on the floor with one foot, and found himself with his pencils and sketchbook. Still feeling somewhat glazed over, he began drawing – then, finding himself thickening the lash line on a portrait of Isola Wilde, he ripped the page from the sketchbook, balled it up and lobbed it towards the bin. It missed and hit Cassio instead, who called him all the names in a ten-year-old's repertoire and kicked the bin over as he stomped upstairs, which set Puck off on a crying jag.

Edgar picked up the baby before Lotus Blossom could admonish him, then threw the entire sketchbook in the bin.

He nodded numbly when Lotus Blossom asked him to run some errands for her, his mind wandering somewhere far away – somewhere thorny, dark and overgrown.

After purchasing cloth nappies for Puck and plant seeds for Lotus Blossom on High Street, Edgar stopped in at the public library. He searched, but couldn't find a single book in the system under any spelling variant he could think of for 'Pardieu, Lileo'.

He wasn't even sure why he was searching for a copy of her storybook. It wasn't as if Isola would start caring for him again if he recited a few lines from her favourite book of fairytales. Against his better judgement, he took a moment to Google 'Isola Wilde'. This search bore fruit; he found a recent picture of her from a local newspaper. She was holding a bouquet of candy floss with James Sommerwell by her side; the glittering dark of a fair behind them. James was smiling but Isola was taken by surprise, mouth agape, as the local press photographer clicked the shutter.

❄

At the end of High Street, he saw the red moustachioed car and thumped on its window.

James rolled it down and hung his arm out, the cigarette between his fingers dribbling ash. ‘What?’

‘James? It’s Edgar, remember?’

James took a long lazy drag, seeming to size him up, and Edgar shifted the groceries in his arms.

‘Yeah,’ he said finally.

‘Can – can I ask you something?’

Are you in love with Isola? The question shouted in his brain, echoing round the chambers of his mind. And more importantly, he thought – *Is she in love with you*?

‘Let me guess,’ the other boy growled, ‘Isola’s giving you the run-around, yeah?’

Edgar didn’t answer, and James laughed rather harshly, lighting a fresh cigarette. James took a deep, slightly grizzled breath and continued, ‘Listen, it’s probably nothing against you. That’s just her. She does something, then the opposite. Like she’s trying to be two Isolas.’ His expression grew colder. ‘I hope you’re what she’s looking for.’

Edgar felt confusion course through him. ‘I saw a picture of you,’ Edgar said quickly, as James changed gears and made to drive away. ‘Just now, you and Isola – you were at some carnival – I was just wondering, are you . . . ?’

Again, James laughed, scrunching up his dark brown eyes. ‘I liked that girl, man,’ he admitted, ignoring the question. ‘I thought I’d make her happy again.’

‘Who says she’s not happy?’ Edgar felt his cheeks heat at the perceived slight. Had *he* made her so miserable?

‘It’s because of her mum, mate,’ replied James, shaking his head. ‘Seven years later and she’s still not happy because of her mum.’

Edgar remembered what Isola had told her, about her mum getting sick, about how she really blamed herself, her own birth. He ran a hand through

his hair; the curls felt suddenly hedgehog-prickly, and he said coldly, ‘Her mum couldn’t help it, James. It’s no-one’s fault.’

‘Sure. That’s what Sola’s always thought. That her mum didn’t *choose* that. Bollocks, she didn’t.’

The silence was almost as uncomfortable as the conversation. James filled it with dragonish smoke.

‘It’s like she’s trying to live another person’s life,’ he said after a moment, eyes fixed ahead. ‘I dunno, maybe she got the idea from her psycho mum – I think that’s why she’s always changing her look, y’know? Like she’s trying to accommodate a second person.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Edgar, as a memory struck him then, slowly but with enormous force, a squidgy hammer to his brain. ‘Like the first Isola – the *real* Isola . . .’ he muttered to himself.

A conga line of cars had built up behind James as his car idled in the street; angry honks reached their ears simultaneously, and they both emerged from the deep waters of their respective thoughts.

As the red car chugged off, James’s cigarette butt sailing from the window like a fond farewell, Edgar wondered, *Was that it, then? Did she think, because both Isola Wildes shared a name, this Isola had to compensate for a life outlived?* She’d told him before that she thought she’d die at nine, had lived with an expectation that never came to pass, and now at sixteen, didn’t know what to do with herself.

In the Belly of the Wolf

As dusk fell, Isola could feel it getting worse. Her throat grew tight, her chest was hollow and cold and her legs pulsed with bruises. She could feel the dragon's claws clicking at her back, cold and steely, and all because she'd found a body in the woods before school, all because she didn't have the nerve to slay a unicorn that probably wouldn't survive another year anyway.

'It'll be all right,' soothed Mother, rocking Isola in her arms while she cried without explaining why.

'Yes,' said Isola, wiping her streaming nose on her hand, thinking of the cross-shaped glass dagger, of a foal like Dusk somewhere in those woods – her ticket back to her abnormal life. 'It's going to be fine.'

Bunny was curled in Isola's blankets. He was barely moving; all four of his paws were made of grey stone now. He wheezed as he inhaled, as though his lungs were getting stiffer, too.

'Bunny, I'm going to help you,' she whispered in his floppy ear, running a trembling finger down his cheek. 'I'm –' she gulped '– I'm going to get you something to eat.'

She pulled on her black boots and switched off the light and felt comforted in a way – that her brothers were coming back to her, even in this torture form.

Next was James.

Isola's phone rang and she answered, recognising his number. Nobody spoke down the line, and she supposed that was all she'd get from him. She left the phone beside Bunny and snuck downstairs, impatient for Alejandro to reappear, in whatever awful form.

It was a bruise-coloured twilight, and she stood on the precipice in her still-damp Mordred dress.

The trees at the edge of the forest bent towards her, calling in wooden voices at a pitch too high to be heard – warnings, perhaps, or welcome-backs. She carried a torch and the jagged piece of mirror. She nervously switched the torch on and off, then, stepping forward, used the broken-mirror piece to cut through the thorny barrier. The old trees were too weak now to put up much of a fight. The cosmic circus was well and truly dead.

She touched the wedding ring round her neck; it had grown almost as cold as her steel-cage ribs. The sky grew darker and the ring got colder as she walked, leading her like a homing device down a clear path through the woods.

It led her to the Devil's Tea Party. It was as though he had been waiting for her.

The unicorn foal had grown – he wasn't the tiny creature described to her. He had a sleek black body – which was rare since most unicorn coats fell between blue-white and grey – a short gold horn, and a purple mane and tail streaked with rainbow. He stood in the centre of the mushroom ring. Above him the white cage hung suspended, back in its original form. Isola could see the corpse's leg hanging down, stockings shredded, most of the meat gone from the bones.

The foal raised his curious head, ripped a shred of flesh from the ankle and chewed happily.

Isola stood outside the mushroom ring, holding the mirror shard so tightly it cut into her hands. Blood trickled down her forearm, spelling 'ISOLA' in blackred letters.

The foal's legs, wobbly as an antique table's, fumbled under him, and he curled up in the feather nest. His nostrils flared as he smelt her anxiety in the air. He dropped the old meat and raised his bloodied muzzle, looking with black liquid eyes into the surrounding foliage.

She stepped forward.

The foal's eyes grew wide, its sweet lashes fluttering. He wasn't afraid of a Child of Nimue.

Isola crouched down beside him. Touched his neck.

At Number Thirty-six, Bunny's breathing spiked.

She hugged the foal close. 'Bunny, I'm sorry. I can't.' The glass slipped between her nerveless fingers and landed in the grass and feathers. Isola buried her face in the foal's mane. 'Dusk, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!'

The unicorn kicked his back hooves playfully. He neighed gently, nuzzled her face, and didn't even seem bothered by her streaming tears.

Isola tangled her fingers in his mane. She kissed the top of his head and whispered again, 'I'm sorry, little Dusk.'

A twig cracked underfoot. A shadow – a shade or two blacker than the dark. The clouds shifted above, and the full moon emerged from its cover.

'Who's there?' Isola shouted, startling the foal, her fingers fumbling for the mirror shard again. 'Is that you, Florence? Nimue? Or are you the witch?'

The woman stepped out of the shadow.

'None of the above, bairn!' boomed Mama Sinclair.

Teenage Exorcism

'A dirge for her the doubly dead is that she died so young.'

– Edgar Allan Poe

Weapons of Bones

‘*Mama Sinclair!*’

‘The one an’ only. And *she*’s not Dusk, either.’ Mama Sinclair laughed. ‘That li’l one’s Dawn. *That’s* Dusk,’ she added, pointing into the trees.

An enormous unicorn slunk from the shadows, stepping into the ring after Mama Sinclair. He tossed his dark head, his glossy black hide almost wet-looking in the slivery moonlight. His silver horn glowed faintly, and Isola switched off her torch. He was sinewy and lean, and not as skeletal as she’d expected.

‘Dusk,’ Isola said softly.

He blinked his voluminous lashes, and in answer bowed his regal head to her. The shard in her hand seemed suddenly cold, and comically over-large. She moved her hand to hide it in the folds of her dress.

‘’E’s head of ’is herd now,’ said Mama Sinclair, proudly rubbing his neck.

‘I thought he was a story,’ said Isola in wonder.

Mama Sinclair gave a small chuckle. ‘’E probably thought th’ same about you.’

Dusk gave a whinny of pleasure. His spiralling horn beamed bright as a star, then dulled again.

‘God love ya, Dusk, you big show-off,’ chuckled Mama Sinclair, scratching his nose. ‘Trying to impress this young Lady here?’

‘I’m not a Lady,’ croaked Isola. ‘I came here to kill a foal.’

She had slain faeries that hadn’t feared her, a dragon that hadn’t harmed her. She’d injured Bunny and she might have killed Dusk – or Dawn, as it were. Feeling disgusted, she held out her hand, the dagger glinting like the Devil’s bright teeth.

‘Aye,’ said Mama Sinclair thoughtfully, but not taking the offered weapon, ‘aye, but the Lady of the Unicorns – she killed, too, when she had to. And that is how it should be. But she always knew when to stay her

hand – as do you, Isola. You wouldn't have harmed li'l Dawn. I wouldn't be here if you 'ad it in ya. You've shown real loyalty to the Children of Nimue tonight. And more than that – you've proven yourself to *Her*.'

'To who?'

'Why, to Nimue, o' course! The Lady,' said Mama Sinclair, sweeping her hands in a wide circle, 'o' these woods.'

'Nimue,' breathed Isola. 'She's the wood witch?'

Mama Sinclair shook her curly head. 'Nimue is the Lady of *all* woods, pet. The witch who lives in this forest does so against Nimue's will. A year ago she came to live in the great oak tree. The tree with the red ribbon, the golden bells.'Mama Sinclair eyed her sadly. 'What lives in that tree is responsible for the creature Florence, for what's befallen your princes, for the evil that's spread, the death of the forest. She is your true enemy. Florence merely fed off that evil, until she had the power to take over your brothers, to possess *you*.'

'It all leads back to the witch.' Isola tucked the mirror shard away in her pocket. She stood tall in her army boots and said, 'I have to get to that tree.'

A dusty blossom floated by, catching both their gazes; something seemed to grow wistful in Mama Sinclair's eyes. 'Like most worthwhile things, it will not be easy,' she said before murmuring to Dawn in a musical language. The small foal was curled in a lump, happily pulling up weeds beneath them. Dawn climbed to her wobbly feet and licked Isola's hand before Mama Sinclair chivvied the foal onwards, and with a last long-lashed gaze at Isola, Dawn clopped off into the darkness.

'She likes you,' said Mama Sinclair, with a breast-jiggling chuckle. 'Well, pet, these are for you.'

Six blossoms floated into the circle, and each transformed – no wands, no glittery mist or spewed nonsense words to conjure them – into six floating, familiar items, pulsing in rhyme like the hearts of old lovers.

The Gifts of the Fairy Godmother

– Alejandro's purple silk cravat.

– A handful of pink glitter.

'Faeriedust,' said Mama Sinclair. Isola smeared it into her dress pocket, remembering, *it heals the good and wounds the evil.* Next:

– Ruslana’s favourite dagger (the Fury had never let her handle it).

Isola turned it over in her palm, admiring the gems set in the cold steel, the rough engraving at the hilt. *For Isola*, it read, and her stomach twisted into sailor knots. Then:

– A pearl from Christobelle’s hair, marbled red and white.
– James’s initialled cigarette lighter.

‘And last but not nearly least,’ announced Mama Sinclair, indicating the last floating gift:

– A shining white bow, complete with three white arrows.

Isola stood on tiptoes to reach the shining bow. It dulled in her hand and she realised what it was made of – the bones from the creatures Bunny picked clean as well as wood from Grandpa Furlong’s mandolin, the ribs of Christobelle’s drowned sailor, and the steel of the rusted birdcage. The string was taut spiderweb and mandolin string.

‘Dusk here will take you,’ Mama Sinclair said, as Isola inspected the arrows, all made of slim, sleek bone.

Dusk’s split hooves nuzzled the dust and he blinked his great black mirror-eyes at Isola. Tentatively, Isola reached out and stroked his rainbow mane. His horn brightened again, a happy glow.

With a hum of satisfaction, Mama Sinclair turned to follow Dawn.

‘Mama Sinclair!’ Isola called. ‘What – what do I do with all this?’

‘You rescue your princes, little Nimue bairn.’

‘My –? Mama Sinclair! Wait!’

But as the long-dead Scottish woman crossed the mushrooms that ringed the Devil’s Tea Party, she dissolved into a cyclone of honeysuckle blossoms, and Isola was suddenly certain she’d never see her again in this realm.

Isola and Dusk Ride Out

The wind bit at Dusk's flanks as he rushed through the night. Isola clutched his neck and blinked through his rainbow mane, and his coat was as chilly as she'd always imagined. His hooves on the forest floor beat a steady elfin drumming, a Spanish bolero.

Strange vines hung in the foliage, ropey as a cloud of nooses. Dusk galloped onward; Isola could feel the stretching sinews in his flanks, the roiling of oily bones beneath her. The branches seemed to clutch at her hair and the unicorn's tail. Spiders had sewn a great web in the scrub so thick that Dusk was wrenched to a jarring stop, panicky hot air puffing about his nostrils.

'Hush, hush, it's okay, hold on!' Isola pulled out Ruslana's dagger and leaned down to slash at the silvery webbing. Dusk gave a frightened whinny. 'Dusk, it's all right, don't move!'

She cut through the web entangled round his forelegs, and Dusk hurried forwards through the darkness, his Zeusian-thundering mimicking the thud of their racing hearts.

Isola didn't recognise this part of the woods. Here, toxic-red coloured flowers had sprouted on fallen logs and moss, and as Dusk trampled them, a great exhale of red smoke billowed up.

A sudden weariness overcame Isola. Cool, molten lead seemed to bubble up in her brain fluid and trickle down through her, settling and solidifying in the lowest hollows of her limbs, and she slumped comfortably against Dusk's neck, winding her fingers in his mane. Dusk slowed his canter to a trot, veering sideways as though about to keel over. Isola's grip on her dagger slackened, and it pierced the palm of her hand. She jerked upright, blinking in confusion, then whipped out Alejandro's silk cravat, leaned down and covered Dusk's mouth. She held her breath and pressed herself to

his soft mane. Sensing the moment they passed through the field of smoke and flowers, they both took a great gulp of air, feeling startlingly awake.

Up ahead a long unbroken wail seemed to bend through the trees towards them. Isola shied away, remembering the hallucinated sirens in the school chapel, but Dusk wouldn't be swayed from his path. They emerged into a slight clearing, and there was Pepito, James's red-rust car, crushed like tinfoil against a tree, its horn blaring continuously. The windshield had buckled inwards. Blood dripped steadily from the car door and down the roots of the old willow.

'James!' cried Isola, but Dusk cantered on, huffing in displeasure when she tried weakly to climb down. Just then the dewy light from his horn fell upon a figure standing in their path. Dusk reared up in fright and Isola almost fell.

It was Alejandro, drugged and dazed, eyes staring unseeingly. He parted his pale lips and froth dribbled down.

Dusk tossed his head, kicking out at the Spaniard blocking their path. Isola cried out in fear but Alejandro merely collapsed back into the leaves, his body convulsing with poisons, and Dusk took the chance to leap over his shaking body and gallop onward.

'It's not real, he's not there,' Isola muttered, her voice lost in the rush of wind, tangling in the unicorn's mane. 'It just means you're getting close.'

Animals were running with them now, emboldened by the unicorn's presence. Streaks of red darted between his hooves as foxes rushed through the undergrowth. Rabbits flooded from their burrows and birds fluttered down from their hiding spots. They were followed by jewel-bright owl eyes and panting wolves on padded paws. Snakes slithered over fallen leaves, scuttling rats clicked their claws on the rocks and bats clouded the sky – they were all clamouring her arrival, urging her on with howls and yips and cooees. The old-soul trees were swaying, creaking encouragement, and flowers hiding underground for months finally poked their bell-heads through the grass, their buds spreading and their clear voices adding to the others, a chorus of *la-la-las.*

Children of Nimue joined the entourage. The straw-doll wood imps hurried after her; she could hear the gentle calls of the phoenixes, their songs accompanied by a hot gush of air in their direction. White feathers

from the swan-men drifted to line the path ahead, and Dusk's hooves thundered them into the earth.

The wildness entourage accompanied them all the way to the source of the sickness that poisoned the woods, pausing in the tangle and the gloom. In the centre of the clearing, the Vigour Mortis tree was blacker even than the midnight backdrop, its great naked limbs sprawling, sap bleeding through the bark. The moon was a bite mark in the inky sky, nestled between the oak's topmost branches.

The surrounding trees rustled themselves to ease the sudden silence. Isola fell lightly from Dusk's back and patted his flank. He retreated into the trees, his horn dimming, the true moon reflected in his watchful black eyes.

'I guess this is it,' she said aloud, drawing an arrow into the bow and lighting the tip with James's prized cigarette lighter. The flame caught in a great burst, and she drew back the string, pointing it at the imagined heart of the Vigour Mortis tree.

She released the string just as something heavy crashed into her. The arrow speared the earth at the tree's base, and Isola hit the ground, then rolled over.

It was Florence, her ruined face half-hidden behind her matted hair. 'LEAVE!' she screamed, as they both scrambled to their feet.

But Isola wasn't going anywhere. She understood now that the witch was Florence's terroriser, the way Florence was hers. It had to end now. It had to be done.

'Florence, listen!' she yelled, pushing the girl away from her. 'If I kill the witch, you'll be free! She's keeping you here, remember?'

'*Remember?*' echoed Florence in a bellow. She swung her fists, catching Isola heavily on the jaw and knocking her off her feet again. 'Ha! Why should I? *You* don't!'

Isola looked up to see the flash of the glass cross in Florence's trembling grip.

'But you *have* to let me kill –'

Isola rolled to the side as Florence brought the mirror shard down like a stake towards a vampire's chest. The glass plunged and stuck in the earth; Florence struggled with it for a moment before ducking to miss the blade swinging towards her. Isola kicked her savagely and then their positions were switched: Florence empty-handed on the forest floor, and Isola

standing over her, clutching Ruslana's dagger. Chests heaving, both girls glared at each other, unmoving for a long minute.

'Go on, then!' spat Florence. 'Try it! What can *you* do?'

Isola lowered the dagger. 'Mama Sinclair's right,' she said simply. 'You're not my enemy.' She turned her back on the ghost girl, going back to the bone-weapons she'd dropped. She stooped and lit the second arrow tip, then drew back the bow.

'What are you doing? Don't you *dare* –'

Before Florence could finish, the second arrow hit the Vigour Mortis tree, and it burst into instant, screaming flames.

'NO! *MOTHER!'* Florence howled. She leapt up, her fingernails scrabbling at Isola's back. Her skeleton fingers caught hold of the steel-bar ribs through Isola's dress, jerking her backwards.

A flash, a scream, a spurt of blood.

Blood edged the mirror shard in Florence's dirty fist.

The Bright Eyes of Annabel Lee

‘ISOLA!’

She clutched at her face. Blood bubbled under her hand, running from her right eye. The shout had come from somewhere in front of her, and automatically, Isola stumbled forwards into familiar arms.

It can’t be, it can’t be, it can’t be –

‘It is,’ said that voice, tight and tense with worry, and she hadn’t realised she’d spoken out loud, and yes, she felt secure with Bunny and with Edgar and with Mother but not *safe*, not completely protected, not like this.

She parted her fingers, squinted up through her left eye, blinking the world back into focus.

‘You are all right,’ said Alejandro quickly. ‘It will all be all right, princess, I promise.’

Where have I heard that before? Isola wondered, feeling somewhat dazed. She peered around the clearing, blinking rapidly to flush the stars from her vision.

Her princes. They weren’t slain. The storybook brother-princes hadn’t reached their own sister in time, but Isola’s protectors had come for her, and for the first time in *so* long – *far too long* – she was glad that she wasn’t written down, that she hadn’t been dreamed up like some sad French fairytale, and the dragons hadn’t won yet.

The clearing felt so full, and her chest seemed to swell, a lovely pain and pressure against the bands of her rib-birdcage, and she didn’t mind the hot bolt of pain in her eye, or the indistinguishable screeches of her haunting behind her, or the pinched, terrified faces each brother-prince wore – they had come for her, and she was *happy.*

‘Stop!’ Isola heard Florence shriek in her wrecked voice. ‘Let *go*!’

In her peripheral vision, she spotted Florence struggling against Ruslana’s iron grip. The Fury released her, only to shove her backwards into the

Wish-You-Well. With a great splash and a glitter of gold scales, Christobelle knocked Florence off her feet with her powerful tail, and together the mermaid and the Fury pinned the ghost at the water's edge.

'The dust!' said a squeaky voice above Isola's ear.

A pink blur – Rosekin! – danced fretfully around Isola's head, and Alejandro plunged his hand into Isola's pocket, cradling her face with the other. Isola felt her hand prised gently away from her right eye and heard a sharp intake of breath before something grainy was dribbled into the socket. She flinched, but already the hot flow of blood down her cheek had slowed to a trickle, and she watched Alejandro untie the silk cravat from her wrist, looping it tightly around her eye, clotting up the wound.

The rush in her head was passing; she felt steadier, more solid, and Isola passed her one good eye over the princes again. All but Jamie had returned to her side – they were slightly smoky, a magician's illusions, more unreal than ever. A diamond shone on Alejandro's starched cuff, another in his eyes, which crinkled with concern as they gazed upon her.

'Isola,' said Grandpa Furlong in his gentle cadence, and she closed her uninjured eye for a moment, letting the sound of her name on a prince's lips wash over her.

'LET ME GO!'

Isola snapped her eye open – Florence was shouting, her struggles against Christobelle and Ruslana violently renewed, and before another word was said, Isola had torn herself from Alejandro's grasp, landing on her knees at the reedy bank. She lifted her hand and hit Florence as hard as she could. 'What is wrong with you?' she bellowed, even as Florence screamed back in hysterical rage. 'What have you *done* to us?'

'Isola –' said Grandpa Furlong again, the reprimand against violence clearly climbing his old throat.

But Isola raised a hand. '*What?*' she growled at the girl.

'I – just – wanted – your – *attention*!' wailed Florence, struggling uselessly against the iron grips of the Fury and the mermaid.

'Well, you've got it now, Florence – whoever you are.' Isola loomed closer to the captive spirit, trying to penetrate that stringy dark hair with her glare. 'What is it you've been trying to tell me?'

'Isola,' said Alejandro suddenly. 'Wait, I think I –'

'No – no, I don't wanna!' Florence cried out, and writhed in the mud.

Isola paid heed to neither. She grabbed Florence by her hair and pulled the shrieking girl up and into the firelight from the crackling tree.

And at last that loathsome hair tumbled off her ruined face, which was lit orange in the night, and Isola gasped, stumbling back as the face of her tormentor was revealed.

Death Masks

‘She looks like me,’ breathed Isola. ‘Why – why does she look just like me?’

The princes flinched in collective shock. Florence wailed anew and tossed her hair forward, crouching to the ground and screaming into her knees. Ruslana, unable to stop herself reacting to a girl in obvious pain, reached out to touch the screeching ghost, then pulled away again.

‘Oh, *querida*,’ moaned Alejandro quietly.

‘Alejandro! *Why does she look like me?*’

‘I –’ The Spaniard swallowed so hard his Adam’s apple bobbed down into his collar. All of the princes were eyeing him, rage beginning to colour their frozen expressions. ‘I only just realised – she – it is a –’

‘My darling,’ said a sweet voice behind them, ‘haven’t you figured it out yet?’

Isola and the princes turned around. There, leaning against the flaming tree, was the lanky figure of a woman. She stepped away unharmed from the blackening trunk, smiling angelically at Isola. Her wild hair was scrubbed around her head, and she wore a black halo of berry twigs and leaves. She had a loop of dead faeries as a necklace, floral wrist cuffs. She had wild hair like the Lady of the Unicorns, her glass feet spiderwebbed with cracks like the waking Beauty’s. She was dressed in a long gossamer skirt, her waist-cinch woven from pond reeds and sparrow bones.

Isola stumbled backwards. ‘I know you.’

‘And I know you,’ acknowledged the wood witch with a graceful curtsey, slipping fluidly free of the devouring flames and standing silhouetted in red.

‘You’re my heroine,’ breathed Isola. ‘You’re Lileo Pardieu.’

Daughter of the Séance

‘What is this?’ cried Isola. ‘What’s going on? Why are *you* here?’ She pointed an accusing finger at Lileo.

‘It will be all right.’ Lileo the wood witch smiled. ‘I promise.’

That phrase again.

‘Mother!’ howled Florence, and Isola flinched away – *what*? – Christobelle tightened her grasp on the dirty doppelganger girl, sloshing up the muddy pondwater.

Lileo took a step towards Isola, a curious wonder in her eyes. She didn’t seem to have heard Florence’s cry. ‘I’m here because you summoned me, remember?’ she said gently, in a voice like bells on red ribbon. ‘The séance last summer? You wanted me here, Isola – especially after you saw that boy jump to his death on the television.’

Isola felt the choked breath of the trees, the quiet terror in the animals watching in the dark. She tilted her head back, to the stars amongst the tangled canopy of a dying wood. ‘But, I–I didn’t want *this*!’

Lileo eyed her curiously. ‘Then what *did* you want from me?’

The princes hadn’t moved, and Isola wondered what they were waiting for. Moreover, what was she waiting for them to do? This wasn’t the showdown she’d expected; her weapons so far had been futile against the witch, who wore the face of someone Isola idolised, like a porcelain death mask. She looked around at Florence, who, under the muck and the great red handprint she’d left, suddenly seemed something to pity and not be frightened of at all. ‘I never knew you had a daughter,’ she murmured.

‘Of course you knew,’ corrected Lileo. ‘Darling, you *are* my daughter.’

The crackling of the burning oak tree filled the silence.

‘You’re not my mother!’ Isola snarled, suddenly defensive of the woman being eaten alive by illness at home. ‘You’re a dead storyteller! I have a

mum, and yeah, maybe I *used* to wish she was you, and maybe she's not the parent of the year, but she's still mine and I love her!'

'You do?' said Lileo, who appeared honestly touched at the sentiment. 'Truly? Oh, Isola. Even after everything I put you through?'

'YOU'RE – NOT – MY – MOTHER!' Isola bellowed, and she threw Ruslana's dagger as hard as she could at her. The wood witch caught it easily, dropping it to the forest floor without even examining it.

'But I am,' said Lileo sweetly. 'Darling, you must remember –'

'Do you?' Florence interjected.

They all looked down at the girl in the mud with her dark hair and striped stockings and torn black dress. A girl so unlike Isola in every way but her face.

'Do you remember?' Florence said hoarsely, left eye fixed wide on Isola. 'What happened when you were ten?'

'When I was ten?' Isola repeated blankly. Hadn't Bunny asked her the same question – what had she told him then?

'REMEMBER!' Florence shrieked, her static voice exploding like a star, a great rush of wind.

Isola's hair and dress whipped around her and she felt an electric current flood through her brain. And through her own bloodied right eye she saw it – a film playing in her head, taking her away from herself.

The Girl Who Was a Fairytale

Born under the sun in Lille, northern France, Lileo wasn't always a Pardieu. She began life with her father's surname – a man who gave Lileo sermons in a thunderous manner, as if *he* were the one nailed through his wrists and ankles. He preached a furious love, a divine suffering, and throughout her childhood, Lileo suffered in silence.

Despite her best efforts to suppress it, the strangeness began slipping out. The other schoolchildren called her *fille étrange,* and said she kept ravens and black rabbits in her thick dark hair, and their parents denounced her as an unlucky omen, for wherever she went the wildlife followed, foxes and rabbits swarming the farmlands they tended.

Lileo's mother, who had always seemed so understanding, would strike the girl across the face whenever she brought up the Nimue-world, whenever her curious eyes followed faeries as they drifted up the chimney.

'*Tu es trop vieille pour les amis imaginaires*! Lileo, you are too old for imaginary friends!' the no-longer-Nimue woman roared, and Lileo grew up thinking books brought only trouble and the world would be better off if those damned covers stayed shut, their words left to fester inside.

They moved to London when Lileo was five, occasionally travelling back to France to bury their extended family in grand churches while Latin hymns rang out and Jesus watched from the coloured glass windows.

It was in a cemetery in Paris that she first met the ghost of Oscar Wilde, who was the first person to show her true kindness. Through him she discovered a cosmos of books unread, words unlearned.

Lileo's parents hated the books she buried her nose in, even the studious classics Oscar Wilde recommended to her. She daren't even tell them about the leather book under her bed in which she was recording all her fanciful tales, hoping to have someone to read them aloud to someday.

They despised the loose way she wore her hair, how she openly preferred cathedrals of sunlight and altars of wildflowers to the worship dictated between the pages of that book. When she entered adolescence, during their summers back in rural France, the boys she refused to kiss would label her a *sorcière*, and she ran away to stalk the graveyards, and stole cigarettes and lipglosses and sticks of bubblegum from the local *supermarchés*. The Pardieus finally sent her away, to a famously strict boarding school in Avalon, where a cruel nun struck her hands and the only class she comfortably passed was French.

The forest that frothed along the valley lip, she soon discovered, was a Nimue hub, and she'd tear her uniform climbing through the brambles to be amongst the bustle, to speak to these beings in a language no-one else around her seemed to know.

She stroked the nose of a beautiful unicorn foal she'd taken to calling Dusk. She avoided the swan creatures and threw silver coins into the shallow pond. She met a Scotswoman who was Nim-born too, and she met a boy with a caramel kiss just waiting there on his mouth, daring her to steal it.

Lileo swapped his kiss for a golden ring and a home as close as possible to the woods she loved. But it was still difficult to be happy.

Lileo had been using her mother's surname since her time at St Dymphna's. The Pardieus were a long line of women all bearing single daughters, all cursed with unhappiness if they tried to deny their roots – roots that sprouted where the Lake met the Tree – or cursed with men who denounced them as whores or witches or hysterical madwomen if they couldn't suppress their true natures.

Lileo's mother had chosen the first curse. She stayed married, and the more she fixed her eyes to the Word of God, the less she could see, until her memory clouded, and she'd forgotten all about the sons and daughters of Nimue.

Could Lileo have both? She wanted her forest and she wanted her husband – maybe she'd break the curse, or maybe it never really existed, or maybe she only had to try harder.

Her husband tried so valiantly. Lileo was difficult to live with. He didn't know it, but he was trying to share the burden. Trying to carry the curse for her.

She wandered the woodland and rubbed her blooming belly. She came home with the star-rise and he shouted at her – *What was she thinking? She was going to be a mother; she couldn't play at being the wandering nymph any longer!*

That night, for the first time, Lileo Pardieu wished she wasn't a daughter of that wretched Merlin-murderer. Why couldn't she be normal? What had possessed her to have a child? For it was certain to be a girl, certain to be Nimue-cursed, and it would suffer through life as she had.

Mr Wilde was losing his patience. She hadn't made a choice yet. Him or Nim.

❄

Lileo Pardieu lay in a half-dream, thick in the lavender field on Avalon's outskirts. A breeze ruffled her hair, the slipstream of an angel flying low, and her small daughter crept amongst the floaty violet stalks, speaking in a baby babble-tongue. Little Isola would often sing in this language, mimicking the strange words the flowers sang to her.

'Isola,' called Lileo, and the toddler came wandering back, petals crushed in her fists and crammed in her mouth.

Isola stooped to pick up every strange insect and plant in Vivien's Wood as mother and daughter walked hand in hand back to the house. Lileo watched her, ready to stop her putting more things in her mouth – a little Lady, raised as if by unicorns to fear nothing natural.

An oasis. A small daughter, a stack of books on her bedside table, a head full of fantastical tales she'd learned from the Children she'd encountered.

Lileo felt as though her noisy heart might burst with happiness.

But happiness was not an amulet, and slowly the illness crept back.

She took whatever Dr Aziz prescribed, and in between doses she would sit in her bedroom and look out the window, the princess in her tower. Sometimes she practised her death.

She kissed a wild swan-boy with moons in place of pupils and she felt seven years drain out through her teeth, but that wasn't enough. In her worst moments she'd cry and beg her husband to leave her, to take their daughter before it infected her, too, but he'd point-blank refuse and she would tear

off her wedding ring and throw fits, raging at him and the world that wouldn't let her be content, even though she had a beautiful husband and house and a woodland next door and a blue-eyed daughter who had been made out of faeriedust, who could shoot down the moon and no-one would miss it because she was night-beauty enough for the world.

She made compromises with herself, striking Faustian deals. Whenever she felt like running away from her family, she'd look in on her sleeping daughter. Count the breaths she took. Touch her translucent eyelids and try to see through to her dreams.

When Lileo felt like hurting herself, she'd get in the bath. The thoughts hardened, poking her skull with their sharp edges, and so she soaked them, softening the suicidal impulses to jelly, to reset another day.

She told stories to her daughter – some she'd heard told as legends amongst the other Children of Nimue, many she'd invented herself – and Isola laughed and gasped and shrieked and clapped, such a big audience in such a small body. Lileo Pardieu promised herself she wouldn't die until she'd seen her daughter outlive the first Isola Wilde.

Isola was sprouting up as fast as the plum tree in the front yard, and soon she was nine, and the day was approaching. Isola's tenth birthday. The final milestone.

Lileo grew paranoid that Isola's fate was cursed by her name. She tried to push it away. She didn't believe in the Children of Nimue anymore, although they hadn't got the memo and continued to fiercely exist. She didn't believe in prophecies. Her Isola, the Second Isola, would live past ten.

But everywhere she saw death omens for her daughter: coded in her breakfast cereal, scratched into the walls, written by invisible fingers in the bathroom mirror.

She was convinced. Isola would be ten soon, and the bargain had to be fulfilled. Death demanded a sacrifice, or else he'd take the Second Isola, too.

Silent Heart

Isola was back in the woods, unsteady on her feet. The vision of the past in her damaged eye was fading, and the present in her single eye was blurring. She couldn't see either world properly anymore.

'It was my birthday party,' Isola whispered through numb lips. 'I was turning ten.'

The last party Mother threw for her: summer, green grass, cake, children; the air was sticky and the sky was cloudless; the guests lolled in the sunshine. Isola remembered shy Grape and mouthy James there, and Rosekin fluttering round and round a blue balloon on a string tied to Grape's thumb, entranced by it. Grape couldn't see her – none of them ever could, and Isola smiled and felt secretly, smugly sorry for those who didn't have Nimue blood running through them.

There was Mother, sitting at the roots of the plum tree. She leaned against the trunk, her eyes shut against the sun. When Isola approached, she woke up, smiled and opened her arms. Her eyes were dark. Her hug was weaker than usual. She was so skinny Isola could feel her ribs under her breasts, the steel bars of a cage.

Mother's freckled shoulders were sunburned. She took Isola's hand, pressed it to her clavicle. Her handprint smudged a pearly white shock in the scarlet, an opposite bruise, and then sunk into her skin, Mother's body memorising the whorls of her fingerprints, storing her DNA.

'I have a special present for you, Isola,' said Mother, handing her the beautiful bound book of fairytales, handwritten by Lileo Pardieu herself.

Curious, Isola opened to the first page and a second gift fell out – a silver charm bracelet, each droplet shaped like the cycles of the moon.

While Isola exclaimed over the pretty bracelet and the extraordinary book, Lileo smiled, held Isola close and told her to live twice her life on behalf of the original, long-gone Isola Wilde. And then she left Isola to play; she'd

spilled champagne on her dress and was going to change, maybe take a quick bath, she said.

Quick was too long, and Isola climbed the stairs in her grass-stained party dress to find her. Somewhere on those stairs she heard the mirror break, a splash of water. She paused, eyes skyward. Then bare feet trekked dirt up to the second storey.

Isola knocked. ‘Mum?’ she said, pushing open the bathroom door. The chandelier light blinded her, and she shielded her eyes for a moment. ‘Mum, what’re you doing up here?’

Mother was a triptych. Hair, toes, bubbles, shadow.

She lay perfectly still.

The hiss of candles extinguishing.

Her head, resting on the bath rim, was turned towards the door, as though she’d looked over at her knock. Her right eye stared unseeingly at the girl in the door, through her to a shadow world that had always seemed to press in on her, jostling for space in the room.

Mother’s dead eye fixed on Isola.

Then it happened. Mermaid fins surfaced in the bubbly water, and baby faeries dribbled from the lit candlewicks to munch on the rose petals floating on the water’s surface. A cloud of sparrows burst from Mother’s dark hair, swooping noisily around the ceiling. Everything beautiful was revealed as ugly at last. Fairytales were monster’s lullabies. Blood was running thick down the side of the tub, spelling ‘ISOLA’ across the chessboard tiled floor. The water was still running and it spilled over Isola’s feet, bringing the wash of blood with it.

Isola looked at her palms. Blood ran from her lifeline.

Footsteps pounded like heartbeats on the stairs, and Father was shouting *no, no, no*, but Alejandro got there first, hugging Isola to him as the last candle hissed out, telling her, ‘Everything will be all right, princess. I promise.’

The magic mirror was broken in the sink. The glass crucifix was clasped in Mother’s bloodless hand.

Isola pulled away from Alejandro, crossed the room. The moon bracelet slipped from her wrist – it was far too big, something to grow into, like an expectation or an heirloom dress. Falling to her knees, while Father lifted

Mother from the bath, she heard it – the most horrible silence, echoing down the veins of the woman before her –

How silent the unbeating heart.

❄

In the woods, Isola spoke. ‘My mother died,’ she whispered through a mouthful of sadness, ‘instead of me.’

That was the only answer, whichever way she posed the question. The second Isola had outlived the first, and Lileo Pardieu-Wilde had died in her daughter's place, a soapy and naked sacrifice stretched out on the bathtub altar, surrounded by fruit shampoos and scented candles – offerings to vengeful gods who demanded blood for their wine goblets, virgin or otherwise, give or take a few decades on the vintage.

'But you're nothing like her,' said Isola tearfully. 'My mother loved these woods, and you've been killing them.'

Lileo's eyelids fluttered closed.

'It's because she's toxic,' muttered Florence, drawing the group's attention again.

'Please, Christobelle, Ruslana. Let her go,' said Lileo. 'She's a good girl. She's just upset.'

Hesitantly, they slackened their grips, and Florence scrambled free, falling sloppily in the grass, her torn dress heavy and her eyes shining furiously.

'She's not,' said Isola tearfully. 'She's not good. She's been possessing me.' Nobody spoke, and she asked, 'Who is she?'

It was Alejandro who answered. 'I believe, Isola, that she is *your* ghost, in a way. A split –'

Isola remembered. *They called them 'splits', or sometimes 'echoes'; half-hearted hauntings, the kind her brothers had always warned her about . . . Unpredictable, confused, often caught in loops. Unable to change, unable to move on, a split infects their surroundings with their feelings – emotions so strong they anchored them to the earth.*

'– like a small piece of you that died,' said Alejandro heavily, 'when your Mother did.'

'I'm not sure what I am, exactly,' muttered Florence, her eyes like daggers. 'What do you think – am I innocence? Am I childhood? What've

you been missing, Isola? What is it that makes you *less* than human?'

Her princes all cried out instantly in her defence, but Isola couldn't untangle their words; people had said that she'd changed, hadn't they? That she'd turned strange and cold, Ice Girl Isola, after her tenth birthday?

'We can't be apart forever,' said Florence, raising her raspy voice over the din. 'But you refused to remember. And once you did, it would all be so *lonely* again – remembering me would mean remembering how we came to be apart, and why no-one ever seems to acknowledge dear dead *Mother,* why it seems Father hasn't talked to her for *years* . . .'

Isola started. Had Father spoken to Mother lately or even looked at her? Had she imagined their minimal interactions? Isola shook away the thought. This wouldn't do, it wasn't Father's fault her princes had been driven out – it was this dark girl before her! 'But you made my life Hell! You took my brothers away!'

Florence snorted in disgust. 'Yeah, and that clearly worked, 'cause they're here now. Obviously they can avoid you if they're given the right motivation, but they just can't help themselves from rushing in. Gotta save the snivelling little princess from the bad old real world.'

Shocked by the venom, Isola took a step back.

'You held them so close because, secretly, you *knew* you didn't have a mother anymore. You only had *her,* the pathetic thing in the bathtub that has the nerve to call you *daughter* – not even a proper ghost, only a piece of what you remember, trapped in an endless loop!'

'But –'

'And Dad never acknowledged her, did he? For almost seven years, it's been as if she doesn't exist – because she *doesn't*, Isola, she's dead! And you're keeping her here,' accused Florence. 'Who's the evil witch here, huh? You're so determined to hold on to her that you've kept this half of her, too –' she jerked her head towards Lileo, who was teary-eyed in her dishevelled nature goddess dress '– the part she *died* trying to kill, to *protect* you *from*!'

Killing Loneliness, Eating Time

With that, Florence scrambled upright and fled, rushing past the Wish-You-Well and under the mossy Bridge of Sighs, vanishing into the dark.

Isola ran after her, under the Bridge. The vision in her left eye seemed sharper than usual. There were tree stumps around her, black and spindly like burnt-out wood, etched with jagged names.

Not tree stumps at all, but tombstones.

The centre of Vivien's Wood was a graveyard.

'This is where you buried me,' said Lileo quietly.

Isola jumped; she didn't realise the woman had followed.

'Your father wanted me in the churchyard with my own mother, but the vicar wouldn't allow it.' She gave a sad little snort. 'A suicide in hallowed ground! Imagine! So you had to bury me out here, with all these long-gone strangers . . . and you wouldn't visit. You'd explore every inch of the woods, but you'd never pass under the Bridge. You stopped looking, and so you forgot how to see.'

The air beyond the Bridge of Sighs felt cold, away from the flaming tree, away from the princes.

'I'm so sorry,' Isola muttered.

'No, my princess, don't be! I didn't want you to visit. I always knew what I was – the worst part of Lileo, broken off, the splinter in her soul. So I left. I haunted the world. I never intended to come back.'

'But I called you back. We held a séance…'

Lileo sighed heavily. 'And she came, too.'

Isola went towards Florence, who was kneeling over a grave, crumpling up flower heads to scatter like confetti. 'I hate her,' sobbed Florence, 'but she's my mother, so I love her, too.'

Isola leaned over the tombstone. She didn't read the name engraved. 'The story about your death – why did you make it up?'

Florence shook her head vigorously. ‘I didn’t – it’s a story, it was all along – don’t you remember *Wolverine Queen*?’ She stifled a sob into her sleeve, and Isola felt something icy in her snap, a piece float away.

It was a story in her fairytale book, one she hated and had made herself forget. All along the truth had been ink and paper bound in a book on her bedroom floor – the visions and terrors like the proddings the real world inflicted upon the sleepwalker. Remember, remember . . .

‘I thought the story would help remind you.’ Her hands, clasped as if in prayer, were starting to shake. ‘I’m so *angry*,’ she whispered. ‘She didn’t mean to, but she killed me, Isola. Split my self up. Trapped with her illness, like you were still trapped with her in that house.’

A single memory floated feather-like through Isola’s thoughts: Father exploding with rage over a breakfast table when she mentioned her ‘imaginary friends’. It wasn’t Alejandro’s name he was reacting to, but the word *Mother* . . .

‘Don’t let her keep you in a cage,’ whispered Florence.

Isola looked at Florence. Her hair, Isola’s natural ashy, dishwater-brown, was stained darker with mud and sorrow. Underneath the accumulated dirt, Florence’s dress was cream with pastel ribbons – the dress she’d worn at her tenth birthday party.

She’d been trapped in the woods for so long. Screaming for Isola’s attention. Remembering, so Isola didn’t have to.

Isola had buried the truth with her mother, festering down there in a box, in the mud, in the dark of the woods. The illness. The stigma. The suicide.

She nodded at the ghost girl and straightened up. ‘I’m sorry,’ she called to Lileo. ‘I’m so sorry about what happened to you. About what’s still happening to you. I wish I could do something –’

‘So stay with me,’ whispered Lileo, and Isola clutched the top of the tombstone to steady herself. She felt crumbling rock, a creep of moisture – all the worldly remnants of her real mother.

‘Stay with *us*,’ Lileo reiterated. ‘We’ll live here. Nimue would have wanted that. Your princes – they can stay, too. It’ll be the world you’ve always wanted.’

‘But I don’t –’

‘Surely you know you cannot go back,’ she said with a bright laugh. ‘Your other mother is an echo, acting out her last years. She’ll never

change!’

Isola moved past her, under the Bridge, back to the burning Vigour Mortis tree. Somehow it still stood upright, its uppermost branches clawing at the sky, fruitlessly trying to cut a saviour rainfall from the belly of the clouds. The Hindenburg moon sat between them, bulbous and burning white.

She saw a vision of herself, drawing back an arrow, setting the moon aflame, and wondered how she’d never noticed the way the Nimue world had bled into the other, through cracks in the walls of that house until she couldn’t separate the realities, like so much tangled thread.

‘Would you stay here?’ Isola asked her brothers, who were standing shell-shocked in a semicircle.

‘What?’ squeaked Rosekin.

‘If I stay here,’ said Isola desperately, ‘will you stay, too?’

The princes didn’t reply.

‘But you see now, don’t you, my princess?’ called Lileo. She emerged from under the Bridge, Florence skulking behind.

Isola met her dark half’s eyes, and Florence gave an infinitesimal shake of her head. *Stay out of the damn woods*.

Smiling, Lileo extended a hand, and for the first time Isola saw something of Mother in her. Something like love.

Isola could feel her pulse battering her throat like a trapped butterfly. By her feet was the bow Florence had knocked from her grasp while protecting a mother she despised. Isola picked up the last arrow. The tip was smeared pink.

‘Faeriedust,’ she said quietly. ‘They say it can heal the good and destroy the evil.’

‘Where did you get those?’ Lileo clasped her hands over her heart. ‘Those arrows – they’re made from my bones . . .’

Isola didn’t answer. She loaded the bow and drew back the string. She felt the company of five silent princes. The beglittered arrow tip began to glow as pink as Rosekin, and for the first time Lileo looked fearful.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Killing Loneliness,’ said Isola calmly, and she fired the arrow. Bright pink streaked through the night.

Right into Florence’s heart.

The Seventh Princess: An Instalment

‘The Seventh Dragon, Loneliness, faced the Seventh Princess and sneered.

‘“You cannot defeat me,” he boomed, the sound shaking his very scales like gongs. “The princes are gone, and you are more alone than ever you were before.”

‘“Maybe so,” said the little princess, “but you are the last of your brothers, too, and I? I will never be truly alone.”

‘The dragon laughed and smoke billowed from his nostrils, coasting over the cliff-top, shrouding the princess in black mist.

‘“I may be small!” yelled the princess, her eyes squeezed tightly against the burning black ash, “and I may be the last. I may not be the most kind, the most loving, the most steadfast – but I have a little of all those things, and while I have those qualities, and the memories of the people who gave them to me, why, then Loneliness can never hurt me!’”

Goodbye-blood

Florence stood a moment, shock shivering down her limbs. Something poured from the wound in her chest, but it wasn't blood – rather, it was a glittering, glowing pink, as the faeriedust ate her up from the inside.

Lileo shrieked with terror and rushed to Florence, her pale hands gripping the arrow shaft, tearing, tugging. The princes and Isola shouted 'NO!' in unison and there was a rush of shadow, a gold glint, a thrust – Dusk galloped out from his hiding place and impaled the storyteller on his golden horn.

Lileo screamed as she was knocked asunder, and the unicorn ripped his horn free. She scrambled aside, her shoulder dribbling blood, and dragged Florence with her. Lileo hauled the shock-frozen girl into her lap, afraid to touch the arrow in her daughter's heart.

'Don't die, don't die, my princess, don't die,' gasped Lileo, cradling the girl.

'But see, Miss Pardieu,' said Alejandro softly, 'she is not dying.'

And at his words, the pink glow in Florence's chest began to spread, enveloping the girl like the fire had the Vigour Mortis tree. The light was blinding – Isola could feel heat emanating from her and she cringed away, shielding her eyes until the warmth and the pink disappeared, and it was dark in the woods once more.

In Lileo's arms lay Florence, still with wide, shocked eyes – *both* eyes. There was no arrow in her body, no blood and dirt in her hair. She was Isola again, but ten years old, with sleek hair and a bright dress and both her blue eyes spilling tears.

'Thank you,' she choked out, and her gaze left Isola and found Lileo's, and she dissolved. Lileo clutched at nothing in the bubbling air.

Isola's breath hitched – she felt something warm pass through her, something pink – then she was whole again, possessed forever by her

forgotten half.

‘You’re welcome,’ Isola whispered, pressing her hands to her chest. Through her dress she felt the wedding ring, resting peaceful over her thumping heart.

‘I don’t get it,’ piped up Rosekin over Lileo’s quiet sobs. ‘Why didn’t you just kill the witch?’

‘Because,’ said Ruslana in a low voice, ‘she chose herself over her mother.’

At this, the storyteller stumbled to her feet. Lileo was shaking all over. The blood from her wound had now spilled over her breast and was black – ink, from the stories she’d left behind, and the ones she’d taken with her.

‘I still don’t –’ Rosekin began.

‘Because,’ interrupted Isola, ‘killing Lileo would keep Florence here. Unhealed and angry. Always trying to hurt me in an effort to reach me.’ She turned to Lileo. ‘But Florence was trapping you here, too. Your guilt was following you around, in the shape of your little girl.’

The flames still gobbling the tree filled the silence.

‘Mum,’ said Isola to the wood witch, ‘you killed yourself, but not me. You don’t need to feel guilty anymore, because your guilt has gone.’

‘But I –’

‘And *I’m* fine,’ Isola reassured her, ‘and I forgive you.’

A potent spell had been spoken. The twig-crown ringing Lileo’s head was blossoming, the dirt was falling in clumps from her skin, her split dress was mending, and her tears were falling thicker than Isola’s. A light was shining through the lines in her palms, the cracks in her glass feet.

‘You do?’

The gold light was now shining from her laugh lines, from the inner corners of her eyes, from under her fingernails. Lileo looked towards the far edge of the woods, to the place where Number Thirty-six stood on Aurora Court. ‘We are connected. If I leave, so will she.’

‘That’s okay.’

‘Really?’

‘No, not really. I don’t know what I’ll do without her.’ Isola’s hands were trembling, and she clutched at Alejandro to disguise it. ‘But I *can* live without her, because she died without me. You have to stop torturing yourself. I mean, you *should* feel a little guilty – you fucked up, royally, and

now you can’t ever come back. But . . .’ Isola looked sideways at the first prince. He always knew what to say.

‘You should also feel proud,’ said Alejandro solemnly, ‘because you left behind a daughter strong enough to weather it.’

‘And you should feel joyous,’ added Christobelle, ‘because now, she’s not going to fall victim to the same dragon.’

‘Feel loved,’ piped up Rosekin. ‘All this time, she only held on to your good side.’

‘Feel blessed,’ added Grandpa Furlong, removing his hat respectfully. ‘You got ten years with her.’

‘And feel at peace,’ said Ruslana lastly, ‘because she’s ready to let you go. All of you.’

Lileo Pardieu crossed her hands over her heart. ‘I loved you,’ whispered the wood witch, the darkest part of Mother Wilde. ‘And I love you still.’

She breathed deeply, exhaled. The light cracked through her, momentarily blinding. Then Lileo Pardieu began to break apart, a corpse rotting in fast motion, but beautifully; golden pieces of her flaked away, until she had dissolved like Mama Sinclair and Florence before her, her ashes mixing at the roots of the Vigour Mortis tree.

Isola fell to her knees.

And then, at midnight, spring came to Vivien’s Wood.

Everything burst into bloom. Flowerbuds ruptured like little red hearts, leaf buds unravelled, a thick carpet of grass shot up towards the sky. The trees’ lagging limbs bounced upwards, energised again. The Vigour Mortis tree trembled, the fires spontaneously quenching before it too exploded into life; bright green leaves fluttered down like snow and the bells on the red ribbon around the trunk jangled with the force of it.

Dusk trotted up behind her. He licked her hair. Inky blood dribbled down his horn and onto her cheek like a tear. Rabbits and foxes and wolves and all manner of Nim-creatures gathered in a ring around them.

But Isola was alone again – the brothers were gone, vanishing on the breeze of the broken spell. She cried into her hands, while at Number Thirty-six a small, shuddering rabbit-creature slipped from his blankets and vanished into the dark, and with a last smile, a relieved exhale, Mother Wilde’s ghost sank under the bubbles in the tub, and the water stirred no more. The last candle blew itself out.

Lost and Found

Edgar was almost home. It was after midnight, the full moon sploshing light along his path. After seeing James he'd stopped by Pip and Majella's flat, and they'd both listened with concerned faces while he told them what had happened with his girlfriend, getting teary as he did so.

Jella had offered to drive him home – something was surely melting in his shopping bags – but he'd declined, needing the walk to clear his head and compose himself. He was now exhausted, having taken the longest possible road back – he knew he'd get hopelessly lost if he tried to tackle those woods in the dark, and besides, Isola had made him promise. His stomach lurched at the thought of her face, how terrified she'd been when Grape and the rest of Pip's wolfpack had vanished into their depths. And even if she didn't want to see him anymore, he'd hold that promise close.

He'd kept his distance to the gloaming woodland, regardless. As he walked he had heard the most awful animal cries, guttural shrieking of varied nightlife, the creaking branches of a horror-movie soundtrack.

He sighed when the single streetlight of Aurora Court came into view. As he pulled his house key from his jeans pocket he heard a familiar cry.

'Isola!'

Dropping his groceries, he turned to see Grape and Ellie Blythe Nettle ride up outside Number Thirty-six from the opposite direction, stopping under the streetlight. Ellie Blythe stayed perched on her bike, propped up on her lean, freckly legs, and watched with obvious worry as Grape laid her own bike across the lawn and called up to Isola's window.

'Grape?'

She whirled around, then hurried towards him.

He realised her jumper was zipped over her pyjamas and gaped at her. 'Grape – did you sneak out?'

She waved impatiently. 'Oh, Eddie, *please* tell me you've seen Isola.'

He nodded, gaze lowering.

‘Oh, good, I was so worried – she ran away from school today, something happened, she –’

Ellie Blythe peddled over to them. ‘Edgar, what’s wrong?’ she asked, observing him keenly. Grape’s eyes widened as she fell silent; there was fear reflected in them, behind her purple-framed glasses.

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, Edgar stared at the ground and muttered, ‘She broke up with me.’

Grape turned to Ellie Blythe. ‘Ellie, listen, I have to – I’ll call you –’

‘It’s all right,’ said Ellie Blythe, leaning in to quickly plant a kiss on Grape’s mouth. ‘Go find your friend. Call me later, let me know you’re okay.’

‘I will.’

Seizing Edgar’s hand, Grape pulled him over to the Wildes’ front door, and started knocking frantically.

‘Something happened at school today,’ she explained tersely, listening for movement inside Number Thirty-six. ‘I rang her all afternoon, but my parents wouldn’t let me leave the house – she’s not acting like herself, and I know she cares about you, so it can’t be a coincidence that today of all days –’ Her eyes narrowed at Edgar’s lack of response, and she started slapping her open palm against the door more urgently.

‘Maybe she was acting strangely because she didn’t know how to break up with me,’ said Edgar morosely. He couldn’t focus on what Grape was saying; he could only think of the sudden ruination of their relationship that he’d never seen coming. ‘And James sort of implied that it’s my fault she’s so unhappy, and I don’t know . . .’ He groaned and gripped his hair. ‘I wasn’t a good boyfriend – I saw a picture of her with James, and I never even read those Pardieu stories like she wanted me to, and I looked in the library but I couldn’t find any –’

Grape paused in her systematic bashing in of the Wilde’s front door to stare at him. ‘Well, of course you couldn’t.’

‘Yeah, she told me it’s rare.’

‘Rare, meaning the only copy,’ she replied.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Exactly what I said: Isola’s got the only copy in the world of that book.’ Grape’s brow scrunched up in confusion. He could hear the worry in her

voice, its insidious creep down her gullet. ‘Didn’t she tell you?’

‘Tell me what?’

‘Edgar – what do you know about her mother?’

❄

In his daughter’s bedroom at Number Thirty-six, Father Wilde stood in the red lamplight, staring at the graffitied wall, the scrambled sentences like a cut-up songbook. As he sank onto the bed a book tumbled to the floor from the bedside table and flicked open from a gush of ghostly wind. Its pages fell open on the story *Wolverine Queen*. Father Wilde picked up the book his daughter had once dropped in the blood-and-bathwater.

His wife’s careful calligraphy had turned harsh and scrabbling on these pages, a story sketched out in haste.

Long, loop-lettered passages of text were completely obscured by great rust stains that cracked the page. *Dried blood,* Father Wilde realised with a thrill of horror. A few of the pages were crusted together, and he could only interpret fragments of the story’s ending, a nonsensical list of instructions for Isola from beyond the grave, it seemed.

She was woman, she was wildwood, she was whore, witch, wolverine. The gold ring on her finger shackled her to reality, to the world beyond the wilderness – and my Isola, this woman, she loved you so deeply that she wanted to wrap you softly in herself, only to protect you, not realising that those bones of hers would instead form a cage around you.

In her birdcage the daughter sung, until

Don’t ever let anyone silence your voice

Don’t ever stay in the cage

Keep your tread light on the edge of the woods – don’t stray too deep into either territory – that is the only place where Children of Nimue can find happiness

Don’t ever let your father see what’s lurking in your Wilde eyes – he will recognise it as me, and he will give up on you

my little princess

Don’t deny yourself your oddities

But DON’T FOLLOW AFTER ME

Lost and Found – Part Deux

He stopped reading after the rambling first page.

How symbolic, he thought. A tale about a girl whose mother left her caged and half-blind to the whole world –

'Oh, Lileo.' Father Wilde heaved, dropping the tome, the bloody relic.

And although he was harsh on his daughter for her reckless behaviour, he knew it wasn't her fault, not really – he knew that his wife had done it; his love; his queen – had spirited away their daughter to a gloaming, wooded place, and even if he sold the house and packed up in the car and moved far, far, far away, his daughter would remain, in that brain-cage, behind those bone-bars, somewhere she couldn't be reached.

And he loved his wife, and he hated her – Lileo, who had lain there in the hellish-pink bathtub, in wait, almost, for the child to take the last few stairs, to slosh through the bloodied puddle in her new party shoes and open a door that could never be closed.

He'd once heard that when Pandora finally wrestled closed that wretched Box of hers, only Hope remained inside.

All Father Wilde had was Isola, and he would put locks on the lid if only to keep her safe.

❄

He was dragged from his spiralling thoughts by a pounding on the door. Blinking rapidly, he dropped the book on the bed – not noticing the curiously rabbit-shaped hollow in the crumpled bedsheets – and went downstairs.

'Mr Wilde!' said Isola's friend breathlessly – Grace? – when he opened the door.

'Is Isola in?' The boy from across the street said urgently.

‘No,’ said Father Wilde. ‘She’s –’ He racked his brain but came up blank. ‘Not here,’ he finished lamely.

The girl’s eyes widened, and the boy – Edward? Elgar? – closed his briefly, as though something terrible had just been confirmed.

‘Where is she?’ the boy said.

‘We need to see her. Something happened at school, she –’

‘Mr Wilde, it’s really important –’

‘What is?’ said a tired voice.

And on the doorstep the three of them turned, and there was Isola, weariness in every crease of her torn black dress, twigs in her hair and blood trickling from her purple-bandaged right eye.

Beautiful Things

The garden was not quite as beautiful as she'd always thought. The stench of neglect curdled it before her eyes. Even the roses were beginning to rot, grey and crumpled like smoker's lungs.

After reassuring Grape and Edgar that yes, she was all right, and yes, she'd been acting bizarrely of late, but yes, that was past, and no, she hadn't meant anything she'd said – Isola gave Edgar a meaningful look upon speaking the latter – Father shooed them off and took her to the hospital.

Overnight they sat together in the uncomfortable plastic seats, waiting to be seen by a doctor. Isola wouldn't speak about what had happened and Father didn't press it; he just gripped her hand and talked gruffly about maybe visiting his parents in London sometime, and whether she'd introduce him to her boyfriend anytime soon, and how he'd read in the newspaper about the ecologists the Avalon council had hired to try to save the forest, finally noticing its sickly state.

Awkwardly, Isola leaned her head against his shoulder, and just as slowly, moving as though he might startle her, Father Wilde raised his free hand and gently stroked it through her hair. His fingers found the natural part in her curls, ignoring the matted blood and caked-on dirt, and she realised that even now, while only speaking of mundane things to fill the sterile white void of the hospital lobby, Father Wilde was still telling her a story.

Isola left the hospital at dawn, her eye covered by a white eyepatch while the cut in the egg-orb healed.

Her room was empty of supernatural rabbits, the window slightly open, like the part between freshly kissed lips. She was expecting to find a creature made of stone, but she hoped that this meant their contract was broken, and he had survived and gone to eat the thyme of other girls who needed him more than they knew.

In the attic, she looked at photographs of Mother, which, she realised – she'd known all along – were photographs of Lileo Pardieu, the dead French-born fairytale maven, and her beauty, at least, wasn't imagined. There was Lileo with a blooming belly, and in a wedding dress, and the portrait they'd placed atop her coffin at the funeral, and Isola was ten, and her mother was Lileo Pardieu, sometimes Lileo Wilde if the letters and bills were addressed incorrectly.

Lileo, born in France to strict Catholics who rejected the magic she lived by, the half-girl half-creature made up of night and stars. She had gone in reverse, from the city of metal and glass to the forest, with her husband whose surname she loved but didn't take and, with her foal-baby, she had tried to build a new life.

But her old lives had weighed on her, thoughts and memories like anvils, pearls around her neck, dragging her back to the bottom of the sea. Lileo – the curse word, the lover's word, ancient and untranslatable, the word that summoned bats and north winds when spoken backwards. The magical name of a glittering girl who couldn't live for her daughter, who couldn't die for herself.

The photograph at the back of the book of fairytales was merely placed between the pages, an antique flower left for pressing. A picture of Isola's mother in her gangly punk youth, skinny as Death, clad in cat-burglar black. Mother. Mother upstairs in the bath, Mother spritzing her neck with floral perfume, Mother stretched out in a lavender field, peeling off her cyborg boots, combing her hair, lying dead as Ophelia in her lukewarm stew, handing Isola a bound book of instructions, histories and lies . . .

Isola conjured an image of Mother sun-dappled orange under the plum tree, writing in the back of the book at her tenth birthday party, the chirp of crickets in the grass, a glass of champagne growing warm by her side.

Underneath the author's photograph were the last written words of Lileo Pardieu – just as Isola had always suspected.

I will always be unhappy and I fear that I will poison you with it. I want you always to be as you are in this moment. I see you now, Isola, and you're laughing, smiling, happy. I see your gorgeous hair trapping sunlight. I see cake on your hands and grass stains on your bare feet. I see such joy in my

little girl. A future gold-gilded and safer without me. And what beautiful things I see . . .

The last line the words of St Dominic, patron saint of juvenile delinquents, of petty criminals and teen anarchists and terribly sad people about to commit an unchangeable act.

Isola pushed open the bathroom door – the door from her nightmare – and the curtain was drawn and the chandelier was lit, and all the candles were melted down and the tub was bone dry and Mother was dead.

And now in a secret graveyard a chunk of rock that might have once been a volcano piece or a dinosaur bone had the name LILEO PARDIEU stamped upon it in silver lettering, with dates and a dash and a sad little phrase that somehow held thoughts of candlelight and new dawns and Living Forever. Things that flicker and snuff out. Things like Death that are beautiful because they are so terrible, things like heaven that are so terrible because they are so very far away.

The brother-princes were gone, hadn't even said goodbye – it must have hurt them, but it hurt her more. Florence was gone, but each brother had proven that there were sleeping dragons inside all of them, that they could never again trust themselves around her. Perhaps now the ghosts had crossed the universe, the Fury was knee-deep in some poor girl's blood, the mermaid was stormcalling, and the faerie was with Mama Sinclair, sleeping in the honeysuckle.

Mother's bedroom was empty, the curtains drawn. On the bedside table were long-expired medications, dusty photographs of a small Isola and a tall stack of books, marked to show her place – classic fairytales, Oscar Wilde, Edgar Allan Poe, Mother's own scribblings, Nimue legends, unicorns and dragons and girls otherwise . . .

Hearing Daisies

At the funeral Isola stood in her lace party dress and monochrome striped stockings. She read aloud, in a cracked voice that bled down the aisles, the forest's broken songbird:

'Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daises grow . . .'

At the wake Isola sat quietly at a piano in the far corner, playing with one hand a little lullaby Grandpa Furlong had taught her, a song that sounded an awful lot like the one Florence would one day sing at her window.

A black-suited and rather shaken Dr Aziz sought out Father over coffee and lemon cake, promising he'd done everything he could, and Father shouldn't blame himself, either, but sometimes they couldn't be saved, like Sylvia Plath, you know, sometimes it's reactionary or hereditary or just inevitable . . .

Their solemn faces then turned to stare at her, and an image bubbled up in Isola's mind, volcanic and shocking – Mother's right eye, a dead and bottomless pool, staring out, pinpointing her – and she jolted back to the present, to the wake and the cold piano keys and a weak cup of tea and Alejandro's hand on her shoulder, and that was the first time Isola Wilde pushed something down, submerged it until it stopped struggling, and she took a deep breath, opened both her eyes, and continued living.

Something in her was already starting to die.

La Mort d’Isola

Isola threw open every window in the house, propped Mother’s bedroom door ajar to let the sour air drift out; the dust and memories. Afterwards, Isola soaked in a long, hot bath.

That night, as they lay holding one another in her bed, Isola told Edgar everything. Everything James would have scoffed at, Grape would have been worried by, Sister K would have denounced as the Devil’s interference and Father would have shouted at if she’d dared bring up. She told him what had happened to her mother and to her – all without breaking the unspoken code of the Nimues.

There were some things about girls that boyfriends weren’t meant to understand.

Edgar listened, didn’t interrupt. The curtain was open, and by hot moonlight he took the offered book and read the last words of Lileo Pardieu, hidden under a photograph for seven long years.

‘Probably the only suicide note in the universe to include the word “cake”,’ whispered Edgar through the dark.

After she’d sent him home, Isola climbed up to the roof and watched summer blossoms drift from Vivien’s Wood. A lone star dropped over the horizon.

It would have been wonderful had Edgar been up there, wrapping her up in his long fuzzy arms. And it would have been beautiful with Mother, too – they’d hold hands and sneak sips of peach schnapps, alive together. It would have been a night to remember with any one of her brothers, all of whom were gone she knew not where.

She took a long breath and held it, imagining in that infinitesimal space before release that she sat alone with each of them in turn. The bumblebee flare of Rosekin hovering at her cheek, a glowing fuchsia earring. Alejandro’s knotted cravat silky as it brushed her cheek. The wet slap of

Christobelle's scales against the roof tiles. The click of Ruslana's black talons against her wicked silver dagger. Grandpa Furlong's scented pipe-smoke swirling in her hair. And James, before he started loving her and after he'd stopped – her imaginary Jamie, a pale counterfeit of the real, who didn't measure up on a second, lingering glance. Even Bunny, dozing in her lap, his claws contracting as he dreamt of fresh meat.

All this she saw, and all this she released; all of them vanishing into the stratosphere with the long hiss of her at-last exhaled breath. And they floated on the updraft, ascending to join hands in the ever-lengthening chain that made up the glitter of the comet's tiger tail.

❄

She kept busy, but it was hard to forget. She forced herself to create a garden instead of a graveyard, every blossom a tombstone, all named for her princes. Mother Poe helped Isola until the front garden was as lovely as she'd always pretended it was.

A black rabbit nibbled at a gravestone rose. Smiling, Isola caught him and cradled him in her arms. She pressed his ears flat against his shivering crown. His eyes were disappointingly blue.

'If you ever see my friend,' whispered Isola, 'tell him he's always welcome to join me for dinner.'

The rabbit bared his teeth in a grin. Twin rows of jagged, black fangs.

❄

Edgar took the apple tree he'd never buried in his own backyard and planted it in the hollow where the plum tree had stood. The apples grew scarlet and emerald with their initials already carved into the skin: E.L and I.W. The pips were black diamonds, and Isola collected them in her music box, crusting the frame of Mother's photograph in them.

At the base of the flowering Vigour Mortis, Isola buried four Spanish coins, two in a rabbit-skin, two in an apple: for the wood witch Lileo, Mother's doppelganger; for Florence, Isola's own dark twin, the Isola that almost was.

Lileo Pardieu-Wilde, the Beauty who couldn't Sleep, was finally free of her tower, and returned to her grave under the Bridge of Sighs. On it Isola laid wreaths she'd woven from flowers grown in her garden.

Sometimes, Father came with her. He didn't shuffle so nervously around her anymore; he didn't respond to her delicateness with distance, and their home was warmer for it. He knew something had changed, even if he wasn't sure what. He had noticed, however, that she was no longer wearing that damned wedding ring like a curse around her neck. It had appeared on his bedside table, the gold slightly flaking, his wife's initials engraved along the inside.

And sometimes, out of the corner of her eye, Isola thought she caught sight of Dusk the unicorn, regal and well-fed again, rushing through the undergrowth, bearing a Lady on his back. She was as wild as ever, and her black French hair had grown down to her ankles.

❄

Isola was seventeen, and Edgar was curled in her bed, painting a rabbit on her collarbone. Not a fuzzy white courtier late for an important date, sending poor mad girls tumbling down burrows – but a red-eyed bunny, a garden-variety gargoyle.

And then they were painting each other's portraits on the diary-wall behind her bed, obscuring years of painful scribblings under great mad splodges, and when they touched each other's bodies they left fingerprint trails to mark where they'd been.

And Edgar had eyes rather like Bunny's, except not glowing red and not watching her like he wanted to eat her up. Well, he was, in a way, but she thought he wanted to do it slowly, to savour and devour her over a hundred years of always being together.

And in the morning, Edgar woke, curled round her spine, wrapped in her desert-genie body heat. Regretfully, he slid out from under the blanket, cricked the knot between his shoulder blades, and wrote on the still-dripping diary-wall behind her bed in gigantic pastel print:

ALL MY LIFE IS BURIED HERE

Talisman

For her eighteenth birthday, Edgar asked Father Wilde if he could have that wedding ring Isola used to wear as a talisman. Sneakily, he took another stone – a shiny red pearl she kept in a music box that played a haunting little tune when opened. Sometimes, when she didn't see him looking, she sat at the vanity, opened the box and held the red pearl so hard she could have pushed it into her palm, swallowed up through her lifeline.

They had a party, her first in eight years. Edgar saved his gift till last: the gold wedding band that had belonged to Lileo Pardieu, topped with a marbled stone he didn't know the origin of.

A ring of hers repackaged. A brand-new talisman.

Teenage Exorcism

She sent Edgar home to his own bed for a change, and stayed up to unwrap the package that had come in the mail. Not a birthday gift at all. Rather, a gift for someone else.

It was a hardback book with crisp lettering, fresh paper. She ran her thumb down the cool spine as though it were a loved one's.

Fairytales for Wilde Girls
by Lileo Pardieu-Wilde and Isola Wilde

The photograph at the back was of Mother at Blood-pearl Beach, a small Isola clutching her knees, and a beardless Father behind the lens.

The dedication:

In loving memory of my mother, Lileo Pardieu-Wilde, and to all girls everywhere, dead or otherwise.

She'd added her own stories to her mother's, updated *Wolverine Queen*, given a few more girls their happy endings. She stayed up half the night admiring the new illustrations and tracing words she'd memorised, all so beautifully different in print, and soon to be held by other girls, maybe some who needed a fairytale or two. Maybe even another Child of Nimue, who would recognise the familiar creatures, the distorted but beautiful viewpoint of the world, and know they weren't ever alone.

'Go to sleep,' said a familiar voice above her, and hands lifted the book away. 'You have had a long day.'

Isola flopped down on the pillow and said through a smile, 'Fine, fine. Love you.'

'I love you, too.'

'Goodnight.'

‘Goodnight, *querida*.’

The Seventh Princess: The Last Instalment

‘Once the last dragon, Loneliness, had been slain by the Seventh Princess herself, she ran, as fast as her soft, dainty feet could carry her, and they were soon pierced by rocks and fields of nettles. She ran following in reverse the trail left by her brothers. She ran through biting snow and along the shore, and when she finally returned home, brother-less, much older than when she’d left, she peered in the castle window and saw her parents cradling their new fair-haired baby.’

Isola was almost asleep; her lashes fluttered as she struggled to outlive the story’s end.

‘They loved her and missed her, she knew, but she couldn’t bear to tell them the fate of her brothers. Besides, they had found happiness now, had caught it like a cloud, shaped and swaddled it, and she daren’t break it up. She left the castle under the cover of darkness, cloaked and still bare-footed, a sword white as bone strapped to her back.’

Dream figures were already playing out on the cheeks of Lileo’s daughter, a shadow theatre projected from the light inside. Wobbly perigee moons and volcanoes belching butterflies, all cast across the star-speckled eternity that is a little girl.

‘Legends soon spread across the region of a small, cloaked girl with a sword of bones, protecting their kingdom and the worlds beyond, seeking out dragons and slaying them, freeing villages and protecting treasures, occasionally rescuing small blonde royals.’

Lileo Wilde dropped her voice to a whisper, her pale lips hovering like butterflies over Isola’s ear. ‘And sometimes, the rumours said, if she was seen in just the right light, the setting sun cast a path of blood at her long-hardened feet and, running after her, the encouraging shadows of six ghostly brothers.’

The Ever After

The sword, made from the bones of six loving brothers, was what the Seventh Princess had used to kill the Seventh Dragon. It had never made sense to Isola, until now. Using the bones of loved ones to slay dragons – it meant using the memories of people she loved to defeat Loneliness.

And Isola often used her mother's bones to slay dragons. They came to her at night, nibbling at whatever body parts lay exposed, breathing hot, sticky clouds over her face – air that threatened flames. And Isola turned over, with one hand holding on to Edgar while the other held on to thoughts of Mother – of Mother in a scarlet bikini at a beach, a proud belly protruding; of Mother reading stories; of Mother as Lileo, black-rimmed eyes, cyborg boots; of Mother when she still loved Father, when she had the strength to stay Wilde. Isola loved Lileo until the dragons crawled back to their glittering dens, until the only thing possessing her was a warmth settled in her chest, her body a velvet-lined music box for her heart to rest in.

Love was the exorcist.

The drip-fed truth about Mother had unravelled her, and love had wrapped her up again. The bandages were thinner than she was used to. Her princes and fantastical friends had covered her, protected her, swaddled her tightly, arms like armour. And then, with her guardians stripped away and her true skin exposed at last, Isola had burned. Isola had hurt. And now, love was the second skin – the regrown protection that still exposed her to the cruelty of people, the lily-pale armour riddled with cracks through which reality could pierce.

Sometimes she was scared of her future. Maybe one day she'd stick a hunk of glass through her arm, too. Sometimes, her skin crumbled like gingerbread in milk, and she panickedly thought she was possessed again

by the sad Isola that could have been, the daughter accidentally poisoned by her mother.

But then it would be summer again, and she'd glue rhinestones around her eyelashes, breathe deeply for the first time in months.

She'd see Edgar, the slight pudge of his belly, his curly hair like Japanese silk, and they'd take lilies and picnic blankets to the graveyard, and read other people's books, and remember a little princess who defeated the worst of the dragons. Loneliness was not immortal. Tragedies played out and then came to a close. Everything ended but the stories themselves.

And some days, she'd close the book. Forget it all happened. Her unstyled hair grew oily and colourless, and she'd eat nothing but comfort food, toffee apples and green-tea sorbet, and when she felt up to it, she'd lie in a lavender field until she felt ready to remember again.

She reached across the mattress. The stubble on Edgar's chin razed her skin.

Edgar shuddered awake at her touch. 'What is it?'

She leaned into him, shaped herself. 'I love you, Edgar Llewellyn,' Isola murmured into his hair.

'Love you too, Annabel Lee.'

And they lived ever after, whether they were happy about it or not.

About the Author

Born in 1989, Allyse Near lives in Melbourne, Australia. She studied creative writing at Deakin University and, while there, won the inaugural Judith Rodriguez Prize for Fiction. Several of her short stories have been published in literary journals.

Allyse writes deconstructed pulp-fables that almost always revolve around women, the wilderness and witchcraft. Her inspirations include the occult, the bizarre, the macabre, history, classic folktales, half-remembered dreams, Wonderlands and ghost stories.

She blogs at www.allysenear.com.

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